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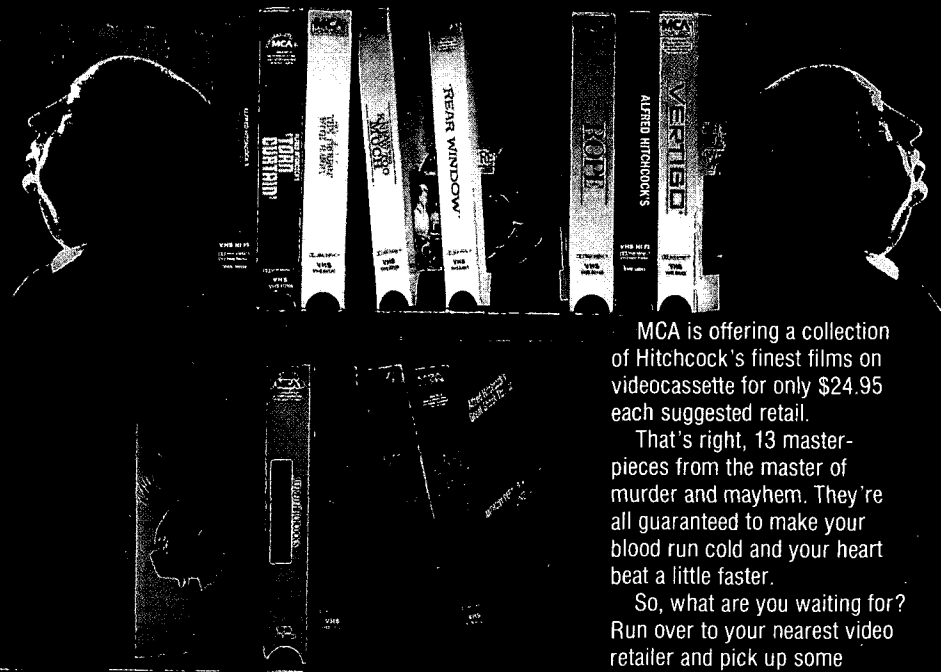
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e are feeling very venerable at AHMM these days: we have turned thirty! The magazine has, that is, with this issue, and all of us are glad to be on hand to celebrate this milestone.

The first issue was dated December 1956 (the thirteenth-issue-per-year wasn't introduced until 1980), and its yellow cover bore a photograph of Alfred Hitchcock superimposed over his famous silhouette. It contained 144 pages and cost 35¢ (well, there *were* fewer pages).

During the five-plus years that we've been editing the magazine, we have greatly enjoyed making the acquaintance of many of its long-time authors, and enjoyed as well discovering new ones. This issue contains some of both: Stephen Wasylyk has been writing for

AHMM since 1968; Wyc Toole's first story in AHMM was published in 1969; on the other hand, Doug Allyn and Elliott Capon are relative newcomers. And though they are both established writers, we welcome William Wise and Patricia Moyes to our pages for the first time.

We've expanded the Mysterious Photograph contest to *three* photos in this issue, by the way, as part of our birthday observance. So take a look at page 79 and see what you can do with it; we'll be looking forward to the results!

In the meantime, many thanks to all our readers—those who have been with us for many of those thirty years and those who have just bought their first copy. We greatly appreciate your support.

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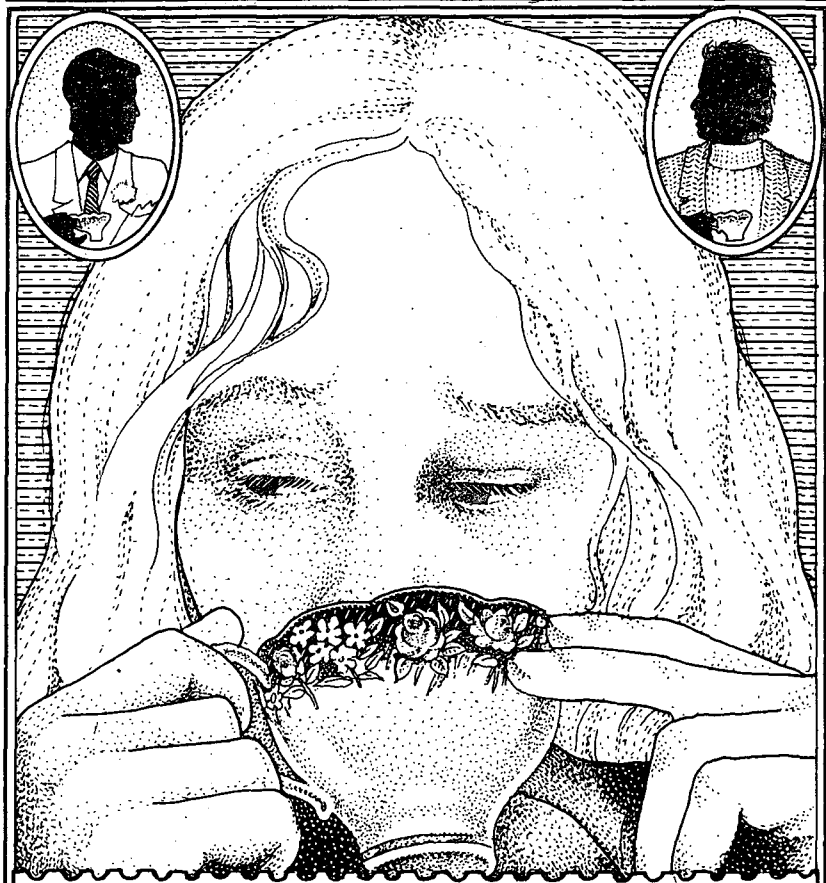
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FICTION



**A Young Man  
Called Smith**  
by Patricia Moyes

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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**O**f course, the whole thing was my fault. I admit that. All the same, even though my husband Tom says that I'm the daffiest, most scatterbrained woman that ever walked, I maintain that it was the sort of mistake anybody might have made.

It happened last summer, when Tom decided that since he was going to Paris for the International Plastics Exhibition, he might as well take a quick flip around his clients in Zurich, Vienna, Milan, and Lisbon while he was about it. That's one of the disadvantages of being married to a tycoon. Half the time you see him only before breakfast and after dinner, and the rest of the time you don't see him at all. However, there are compensations, like a flat in town and a rambling country house near the Sussex coast and a well-stocked wardrobe and a bank manager who sees you personally to the door, bowing all the way. I wouldn't like you to think I was complaining, especially as I happen to have the best and sweetest husband in the world thrown in as a sort of bonus.

Tom's quite a bit older than I am, and I think maybe that's why he's so considerate, and why he worries about having to leave me alone when he goes off on these trips. This time, I must admit that I was really quite

upset when he broke the bad news. You see, we were all set to go down to Meadowcroft—that's the Sussex house—for a couple of weeks' peace and quiet.

"Never mind, Margie love," he said. "You go on down to Meadowcroft, and I'll join you when I can."

"I don't like being there alone," I objected. We don't have any help living-in at Meadowcroft, just a woman who comes in two mornings a week.

Then Tom had an inspiration. "I know. Why don't you take Sister Susie down there with you? She's on holiday, isn't she? She'd probably enjoy it, and she'll be company for you. You can take it in turns to guard my stamps."

This last was a bit of a family joke. Tom's passion in life, next to the plastics business, is stamp collecting. He's been at it ever since he was a schoolboy, and by now—with money to spend and plenty of know-how—he's accumulated a collection worth several thousand pounds. As he keeps on pointing out to me, stamps are just about the easiest things for a thief to smuggle out of the country, and he's so scared of his collection's being burgled that it travels everywhere with us, in a sort of tin trunk. There are only two keys, one on Tom's key ring and the other in a special drawer in

whichever house we're in: Tom says he wouldn't trust it to my handbag, and I dare say he's right. Mind you, it's not that he couldn't afford to replace the whole collection over and over again: it's the time and trouble he's put into those stamps that make them so precious to him.

Well, my young sister Sue jumped at the idea of coming to Meadowcroft with me. She was teaching at a primary school in South London at the time, and, having blued all her available cash on a skiing holiday in January, she was faced with the prospect of spending the long summer vacation either doing a temporary job, or moping in her dismal bedsitter in Clapham. As we drove down to Sussex, Sue confided to me that my invitation had been especially welcome because she had just parted forever from the latest of a long line of boyfriends.

"Not that I'm moping for him, Margie, don't think that. He turned out to be a complete birdbrain. But I'd sort of got used to having him around."

This seemed to give me an opportunity of bringing up a subject that I'd had on my mind for some time.

"I do think, Sue," I said, "that you ought to think seriously about your future." I tried to sound as mature and parental as I could, which wasn't very, considering that Sue's twenty-

three and I'm only five years older: but since our parents died ten years ago, I've had to do quite a bit of mothering vis-à-vis young Sue, and she generally took it very well when I lectured her.

This time, however, she seemed to sense what was coming, and shut up like a clam. "I don't know what you mean," she said. She closed her mouth very tight and looked out of the car window.

"Look, honey," I said. "Let's face it. You and I have only one asset in this world—our looks. There's no getting away from it."

"I happen to think that other things matter," said Sue, stubbornly.

"Of course they do," I said. "It's just that we don't happen to be well endowed with the other things. I admit you're ten times as clever as I am, but that still doesn't put you in the Einstein class, does it? You may like to think of yourself as a great intellect, but in fact you're an overworked, badly paid school teacher, and likely to remain so, if you don't get a grip on yourself."

"And do what?"

"Now where looks are concerned," I went on, ignoring her interruption, "you're in the number one, A level, super first class. You begin where Helen of Troy left off."

This wasn't such an exaggeration, either. As I've hinted, we're both quite personable, but whereas I tend to be the small, fluffy, blonde type, Sue is sort of statuesque. I don't mean in her measurements. I mean in the sort of dignity and elegance she has. She's got corn-colored hair and green eyes the size of gob-stoppers and a honey and peaches skin, and when she smiles it's as though some god-dess or archangel had dropped in to make sure that all's well with the world. My objection was that she insisted on wasting these riches on penniless art students and would-be poets—the whole tribe of wash-outs that Tom had christened "Sue's bearded weirdies." I put this point of view to her now.

"I'm not suggesting," I said, "that you should sell yourself for filthy lucre, so stop looking at me like that. I'm just saying that if you'd only take the trouble to meet a few people who are . . . well . . . getting on in the world, as it were . . . then it's almost a dead cert that you'll fall in love with one of them. Look at Tom and me. You don't think I married him for his money, do you?"

"Of course not, Margie." Sue sounded shocked by the idea. "You were just terribly lucky."

"Lucky *and* sensible," I pointed out. "I found Tom simply because I decided to exclude

from my circle of acquaintances any man whose income fell below a certain level. And sure enough, after a bit, along came Tom. Set your sights in the upper brackets, my girl—there are some nice fellows up there, you know."

Sue sighed. "I *do* get a bit bored with being broke," she admitted. "The trouble is, all the rich men I've ever met are so stupid. They're shallow, ill-informed, and fatuous."

"That's because you haven't explored far enough," I said. I could tell I was making headway because Sue fell into a thoughtful meditation, quite unlike her earlier hostile silence.

At last she said, "All right. I'll give it a try. You introduce me to all the rich men you can find while we're at Meadowcroft, and I'll be prepared to consider them."

"That's my girl," I said.

As it turned out, the laugh was on me because when we got to Sussex I found that any of our neighbors who fell into the right category were away sunning themselves in Elba or Sardinia. In England, the weather was idyllic. The sun shone, and Sue and I had tea in the garden: but we had it alone. She never said a word about our conversation in the car, but I couldn't help feeling that she was laughing at me, just a little.



After a week, I began to get worried in case she was bored, and fretting for the banished boyfriend. So I was pleased when, around teatime on the second Tuesday, I looked up from my gardening to see a battered red sports car making its way noisily up the drive. It looked and sounded as though it had been constructed out of a do-it-yourself kit with several vital parts missing, but as it roared to a shuddering halt outside the front door, I saw that it contained a young man. Rather a good-looking young man. I stepped out of the herbaceous border, beaming welcome.

"Good afternoon," I said.

The young man jumped out of the car and came towards me. "Oh," he said. "You must be . . . I mean . . . are you Mrs. Westlake?"

"I am."

"My name's Smith. Bobby Smith. I work for Amalgamated Plastics. I met your husband at the Paris Exhibition last week, Mrs. Westlake, and when he heard I was planning to holiday in Shinglesea, he suggested I should look you up. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," I said. I didn't try to make it sound too convincing. A closer look at Mr. Smith had decided me that Sue and I could well do without him. He was wearing a dirty duffel

coat and crumpled grey flannels, and his brown hair looked as though it hadn't been combed for a week. In fact, he looked too much like a bearded weirdie for comfort, and I hoped that he would take the hint from my chilly tone, and leave.

But not a bit of it. "So I thought I'd—" he began. And then suddenly his eyes seemed to grow larger, and to protrude as though pushed from within, and his face turned a dull puce. He emitted a sound which can best be transcribed as "glug." What had happened, of course, was that Sue had come out of the house.

"This is my sister, Sue Davidson," I said. "Sue, meet Bobby Smith, a friend of Tom's."

"How do you do?" gurgled Smith. "Delighted to meet you. Not really a friend of Mr. Westlake's, you know . . . just met at the Paris show . . ."

He had got hold of Sue's hand by this time, and was pumping it up and down as though he expected thereby to induce water to gush from her mouth. Sue looked at him with, I was pleased to note, no enthusiasm at all.

"How are you?" she said distantly, like a goddess making conversation with some of the less desirable elements of the underworld. There was an awkward pause.

I was aware of mixed emotions. Much as I wanted to be

rid of the young man, he had been invited by Tom to call on us, and hospitality is hospitality. I didn't feel I could send him packing without the elementary courtesy of a cup of tea. This I offered, and he accepted with alacrity. I left him in the drawing room with Sue while I went to boil the kettle.

When I came back, Sue was sitting on the sofa, with Bobby Smith as close beside her as it was possible for him to be without actually constituting the basis for a complaint. Every time Sue edged away from him, he shifted towards her to close the gap, and by now he had her pretty well pinioned in the corner. He was talking about the insides of racing cars. He continued to talk while we had our tea, and afterwards asked to be shown Tom's stamp collection, about which he had heard so much. Reluctantly, I unlocked it, and, by making him walk over to the display case to see it, succeeded momentarily in relieving the pressure on Sue.

As soon as the stamps had been inspected, admired, and locked up again, Bobby reverted to the subject of cars, and began to press Sue to come for what he called "a spin in my old bus." Now, Sue is a gently nurtured girl and finds it difficult to dish out a plain, discourteous refusal. Having made it obvious in at least six different

ways that she did not want to go, she eventually agreed to a short ride, but only on condition that I came, too.

It was purgatory. There was, strictly speaking, no back seat—just a sort of bench covered with a filthy, moth-eaten rug. We scorched and snarled our way to the nearest village where Bobby stopped at the inn and bought us each a disgusting bottle of livid-green fizzy lemonade and a petrified sausage roll. We eventually arrived home at half-past six; I was aching in every muscle and bone, and it was with horror that I realized that Bobby had no intention of departing. He settled himself comfortably in the drawing room with the drink which I had felt in duty bound to offer him.

When I went out to the kitchen to fetch more ice, Sue followed me. As soon as the door was shut behind her, she let fly. "Margie, it's too *awful*! You *must* get rid of him! He'll be here all night at this rate, and he keeps trying to *paw* me . . . it's *disgusting*. Can't you do something?"

"Don't worry, honey," I said. "Leave him to me."

I went back to the drawing room and said, with a cold smile, "Well, Mr. Smith, I'm so sorry. I can't ask you to stay any longer, but my sister and I are due at a cocktail party at seven,

and we have to change. So—”

“Oh, that’s all right,” replied the wretched youth airily. “I’ll wait for you down here, and drive you over to your party.”

“And how,” inquired Sue icily, “do we get back again?”

“I’ll wait for you,” he said, cheerfully. “I’d be glad to come in with you, but I’m not really dressed for a social evening, and these country houses are so hideously bourgeois. It’ll be up to you to slip away pretty smartly, and we’ll all go out to dinner together.”

Sue shot me a look of utter despair, but I was able to take this one in my stride. “I’m sorry, Mr. Smith,” I said, “this isn’t the sort of party that we want to slip away from, and we’re invited to stay on for dinner afterwards.”

“Oh, I say,” he said. “What frightfully bad luck.” You could tell he was really sorry for us, missing the treat of dining with him. “Anyhow, I’ll wait till you leave, and speed you on your way.”

There was nothing for it. Sue and I had to go upstairs and solemnly change into cocktail rig, and get the car out. Even then I didn’t think we’d get rid of him. He insisted on writing down for Sue the address of the third-rate boarding house in Shinglesea which had the bad luck to have drawn his custom, and he assured us that he’d be

calling again very soon. Our spirits lifted a little when he said that he was breaking his holiday the following day to visit an aunt in Norfolk, but they sank again when he urged us not to worry, as he’d be back by the weekend.

When we finally got into the car and drove off, he followed us for several miles until I finally shook him off by superior local knowledge. It was then, speeding recklessly up a leafy lane, that Sue and I both began to laugh hysterically. By the time we got home, however, our mood had hardened: and the last straw came when I found, on the drawing room sofa, the gold propelling pencil which Bobby had produced from his pocket to write his address for Sue. It bore the engraved initials *R.S.*

“He did it on purpose!” exploded Sue. “He deliberately left it behind so that he’d have an excuse to come back. Well, he’s got another think coming. We’ve got his address, so you can send it back to him, Margie, with a note telling him to go and jump off the cliff.”

“I can’t very well do that,” I said, “but I can write and tell him that you’ve had to go back to London. He won’t come here for the pleasure of *my* company.”

“Good idea,” said Sue. “And the next time an unidentified

car comes up this drive, Margie, you and I are going to dive into the nearest haystack and stay there until the all-clear sounds."

She was wrong, of course. It was just after four next afternoon, and I was in the pantry arranging some flowers that I'd cut from the garden, when I heard the gentle purring of an expensive motor car in the drive. For a moment, I had a panicky fear that it might be the unspeakable Smith returned unexpectedly from Norfolk—but the well-bred murmur of the engine reassured me. I went to the drawing room window and looked out.

In the drive stood a grey E-type Jaguar, and beside it stood a young man who might have stepped straight into a women's magazine illustration, no questions asked. He was tall and slim, with straight, shining fair hair, and he wore a beautifully cut sports jacket and a crisp white shirt with a silk scarf in the neck of it. You could tell at a glance that he didn't suffer from halitosis, B.O., or dandruff. He was sunburnt, and even from the drawing room I could see that his hands were as lean and sensitive a couple as ever caressed a steering wheel. Then he turned his head towards me, and I saw that his eyes were dark cornflower blue, thus giving him a score of ten out of ten. The reason he had

turned was that Sue had seen him from her swing chair on the lawn, and was walking over to investigate.

By the time I got there, Sue was standing beside the Jaguar, gazing at its proprietor with a sort of stunned expression. She did not actually say "glug," but it was implicit in her whole demeanor.

"Margie," she said, in a faint voice, "this is Robin Smith. He's a friend of Tom's. Mr. Smith, this is my sister, Mrs. Westlake."

"How very nice to meet you." The apparition turned to me, giving me the full benefit of the dark blue eyes, together with a smile which made even my matronly heart beat a little faster. "I ran into your husband in Paris, and he suggested I might look you up. I'm holidaying in Shinglesea for a week or two."

"You will come in and have some tea, won't you?" Sue asked anxiously, with half an eye on me. I think she was afraid that I might not have grasped that this was the exception that proved the rule.

"If you're sure I'm not disturbing you," said Robin. "I only meant to stay a moment..." We fairly hustled him indoors.

I went off to get tea. When I came back, Sue was sitting—if that's the right word—on the

sofa, displaying a length of exquisite leg, like a goddess who has heard that Apollo will be along at any moment and is anxious not to miss him. Robin was sitting on a small and rather uncomfortable chair on the far side of the room, talking about the implications of pop art. This seemed almost too good to be true. When, over the cucumber sandwiches and thin bread and butter, he went on to discuss twelfth century stained glass and the influence of Ezra Pound on modern poetry and the correct method of preparing *coq au vin*, I could barely contain myself for delight.

The effect on Sue was apparent. By the time we got to Ezra Pound, she had stopped draping herself over the sofa, and was taking a lively part in the conversation—which is more than I was, but that didn't matter. The important thing was that the two of them were striking sparks off each other.

Eventually, we got round to the subject of cars, and Sue dropped a couple of mammoth hints about how she's always wondered what it would be like to ride in a *really* fast car. Robin simply said that he'd wondered the same thing himself, and hoped that a friend of his might let him try a couple of laps at Silverstone in a Lotus one of these days. Then he looked down at his watch, and said

that he really must be going.

Sue was looking at me in a dumb, pleading sort of way, but I couldn't detain the man by force. I did my best to prolong the conversation by asking where in Shinglesea he was staying.

"Just outside the town," he said. "The Shinglesea Towers. Do you know it?"

"I do indeed," I said. It was one of the most exclusive and expensive seaside hotels in Britain.

"It's not bad," he said. "Quite reasonable food, taken all in all, and of course everything tastes better when eaten on a terrace on a warm, moonlit night."

"Like tonight," said Sue, brazenly. (I felt quite ashamed of her.)

After that the poor man could hardly fail to invite us to dine with him. He did it beautifully, though—exactly as though it was a brilliant idea which had just occurred to him.

I tried to keep some semblance of dignity, but the way Sue said, "Oh, yes, *please*," ruined any effect it might have had. We both went up to change, and I lent her my coffee-colored Balmain chiffon, my mutation mink stole, and some diamond clips and a bracelet. I must say she looked good enough to eat.

It was arranged that Sue and Robin should go ahead in the



Jaguar, and that I should follow on in the little runabout we keep in the country. The two of them were in the lounge when I arrived, and Robin provided us with cocktails and then went off to change. One doesn't dine in a sports jacket at the Shinglesea Towers. A few minutes later he came back in a dark suit, looking more like an advertisement for gracious living than ever, and we made our way through the dining room and out onto the terrace.

Though I say it myself, we were quite a sensational-looking trio, and we caused a stir. Waiters were fairly tripping over each other for the privilege of showing us to our table, and I was aware of knives and forks freezing into immobility all over the room as a hundred heads turned to watch our progress. I sneaked a quick look at Sue, and was delighted to see that she was carrying it off superbly. A goddess moving graciously among her humble, earthly devotees. (I felt proud of her.)

It was an enchanted evening. We ate *fois gras* and *homard à l'Américaine* and fresh peaches, and we drank champagne. Sue and Robin danced together with as much ease and expertise as if they'd been rehearsing for weeks, and in the intervals of dancing, they talked about every subject under the sun. Most of the conversation was miles

above my head, but I was perfectly happy just to sit and listen. It seemed to me that I was seeing my sister in her natural element for the first time. She was never meant to live in a bedsitter and teach English to pudding-faced kids, and it pleased me to think that Sue was obviously coming to the same conclusion herself.

It seemed no time at all before the witching hour arrived. The band played the last waltz, the dancers and diners dispersed, and Sue and I found ourselves on the front steps of the hotel, shaking hands with Robin and thanking him for a marvelous evening. Then we got into the car, and I waved a last goodbye to Robin and drove off. At once, Sue burst into tears.

"Take it easy, honey," I said. "I know you're excited and—"

"I've . . . I've n-never had such a b-b-beautiful evening in all my life . . ." sobbed Sue.

"I know," I said, soothingly. "But you'll have plenty more."

This produced a despairing wail. "I w-won't! I'll never see him again!"

"That's just nonsense," I said. "He's obviously crazy about you."

"Then why d-didn't he say a s-single word about meeting again?" sniffed Sue. "He's only here till next week, and he didn't even ask for my address

in London, or give me his. I may as well face it, Margie," she went on, in a fresh burst of misery, "I b-bore him stiff. I'm not pretty enough or clever enough or—"

"My dear young idiot," I said firmly, "pull yourself together. Robin Smith is a very correct and well-mannered young man. When you come to think of it, he thrust his company on us this evening—"

"He didn't!"

"I'm looking at it from his point of view. He turned up uninvited. Then he asked us to dinner, and we accepted—but for all he knows, it may have been just politeness on our part. What I'm driving at is that the next move is up to us. Up to me, to be precise."

"Is it?" Sue still sounded doubtful.

"Of course it is. I shall write to Robin tomorrow, and ask him to . . . to . . . I know! To spend the weekend at Meadowcroft."

"Margie, you're an angel!" squeaked Sue, and nearly put us into the ditch by flinging her arms round my neck just as I was taking a tricky bend. She sang happily to herself the rest of the way home.

The next morning, when I went to my desk to write to Robin, I found myself face to face with that horrible gold propelling pencil, and decided to write

both letters while I was about it. It was even more important, now, to keep the unspeakable Bobby away from the house.

I spent some time composing the letters, and when I had finished I felt quite pleased with them. I took them to Sue for her to read.

The first one went as follows:

*Dear Mr. Smith,*

*After your visit, I found the enclosed pencil, which I think belongs to you. I am sending it back to save you the trouble of calling here for it.*

*My sister has asked me to tell you that she has had to return to London unexpectedly. I do not expect to see her again for some time.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Margaret Westlake*

"Pretty chilling, I think you'll agree," I said to Sue, with satisfaction. She was for making it even ruder, but I protested that only a rhinoceros would fail to get the message. I then showed her the second letter.

*Dear Mr. Smith,*

*Neither Sue nor I feel that we thanked you enough for entertaining us so regally. It was a splendid evening, with superb food, drink, and company—and Sue is still talking about*

*her ride in your fabulous car.*

*It occurred to me that, if you feel you have had enough of hotel life for the time being, you might like to spend this coming week-end with us here at Meadowcroft. It would give us such pleasure—do say you'll come, and make it Friday evening if you can.*

*Very sincerely,  
Margie Westlake*

I had to drive into Shinglesea to do some shopping, so I decided to drop the letters in by hand, to avoid delay. The two envelopes were lying on my desk—one addressed to "R. Smith, Esq., Shinglesea Towers Hotel," and the other to "R. Smith, Esq., Ocean View, Pebble Road, Shinglesea." I wrapped the appropriate letter round the propelling pencil, and then slipped both letters into the envelopes and sealed them. One I delivered to the immaculate receptionist at the Shinglesea Towers, and the other to the sleazy landlady of Ocean View. I expect you'll have guessed by now what happened, and I still maintain that anybody might have made the same mistake.

Disaster struck with the arrival of the post on Friday morning. At first, I was pleased to see a letter with the monogram of Shinglesea Towers em-

bossed on the envelope, but when I picked it up and felt the long, thin, solid object inside, my heart did an unpleasant somersault. I tore open the envelope. Out fell the propelling pencil. Trembling, I opened the letter, which was written in a handsome Italian hand.

*Dear Mrs. Westlake,*

*I am returning the pencil, as I am afraid that, despite the similarity of initials, it is not mine.*

*I am sorry to hear that your sister has had to leave so suddenly.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Robin Smith*

Of course, I had to confess to Sue. She began to wail like a banshee, declaring that her life had been ruined and that she might as well sign on for the nearest convent straight away. This brought me to my senses.

"There's no point just sitting there snivelling," I said. "Fortunately, no great harm has been done. I shall ring Robin straight away and explain that there's been a mistake."

I contacted Robin at the Shinglesea Towers without any difficulty, and although he sounded a bit standoffish at first—and no wonder, after that letter—he soon melted, and said that he was delighted to hear that Sue hadn't had to go to London after

all, and that nothing would please him more than to spend the weekend with us. In fact, he said, he'd been on the point of going back to London because he found hotels desperately boring after a few days. Such was our rejoicing at this, and so pressing was the planning of menus, and the shopping, and the deciding of what clothes to wear, that the darker side of the picture remained completely forgotten until after lunch.

It was only then, when Sue was up in my room trying on everything in my wardrobe to see what suited her best, that the awful truth hit me. If Robin had received the chilly letter, then the unspeakable Bobby had received a gushing invitation to spend the weekend with us. An ordinary person, I reflected, reading that letter with its references to superb food and drink and a fabulous car, would realize immediately that there'd been a mistake, but Bobby Smith was perfectly capable of construing it as a legitimate description of our hellish jaunt to the local pub. I fairly ran to the telephone.

"Ocean View," said the flat, unpleasant voice that I recognized as belonging to the landlady.

"I want to speak to Mr. Robert Smith."

"He's left."

"Yes, I know. But he's back

again, isn't he? I mean, he said he was coming back today."

"He's left and come back and left again. Not half an hour ago. No consideration, some people haven't."

"You mean—he's gone for good?"

"That's what he said. Without so much as by-your-leave. The room was reserved till Sunday." The voice took on a menacing note.

"Do you know where he went?"

"I do not. To stay with friends in the neighborhood, he said. A likely story, I don't think. Hadn't got the money to pay till Sunday, more like."

"You don't happen to know if he . . . I mean, I left a note for him this morning and I wondered whether he'd received it . . ."

"If it was left in, it'll have been handed to him," said the voice huffily.

"Thank you," I said, and rang off.

As I came out into the hall, I met Sue careering down the stairs. She was still wearing the gold lamé evening dress that she'd been trying on when I went to telephone. She clutched my arm.

"Margie! Coming up the drive! He's here!"

"I thought as much," I said, gloomily.

"You've got to get rid of him!"

"My dear Sue, I'll do my best, but I can't work miracles. You'd better go up and change into something more suitable. And for heaven's sake, behave yourself."

It was plain that Sue would have liked to express herself at some length, doubtless on the ruined-life motif, but the angry snarl of the home-made red car put an end to further conversation. Sue gave me a look into which she managed to pack a couple of tirades, a tragic renunciation of all future happiness, and a raspberry. She then gathered up the gold lamé and scudded up the stairs like a goddess surprised by a satyr, just as Bobby Smith walked in through the front door. He did not even bother to ring.

"Ah, Margie! Here I am," he announced unnecessarily. "Good idea of yours, having me here for the weekend. Shinglesea was becoming tedious."

"As a matter of fact—" I began, feebly.

"Shan't be a moment. Just get my things out of the car."

I followed him to the front door. The red menace was standing steaming in the drive, and from its noisome interior Bobby began producing an assortment of articles, as a conjuror will from a top hat. First came three battered suitcases, and a kind of wickerwork basket tied up with string. Then a

tennis racket, a snorkel mask, a pair of ice skates, binoculars, a bagful of golf clubs, an inflatable air bed, and a string bag full of paperback thrillers.

"Never know how the holiday's going to turn out, do you?" remarked Bobby, as he assembled this collection in the porch. "If you'll just show me my room, I'll take this lot up, and then come back for the rest."

"The rest?"

"Oh, just my cameras and transistor radio and tape recorder. I don't like leaving valuable equipment in an open car. You never know who's skulking in the shrubbery, do you?" He laughed loudly.

"No," I said. "You don't."

"Well . . ." He was festooned with baggage by this time. "Lead on, MacDuff. I'm right behind you. But quick, woman, before I drop the lot."

It was all too much for me. Meekly, I led the way to the smaller of the two spare rooms.

When the last load of gear had been safely stowed away, Bobby strolled into the drawing room, flopped onto the sofa and put his feet up, and remarked, "Where's young Sue?"

"She's changing," I said. I knew that Sue, from behind her bedroom door, must have observed what had happened, and I knew she wouldn't appear until she had to.

"Changing?" Bobby smiled,



with repellent smugness. "She needn't have bothered to dress up just for me."

"She isn't," I assured him.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that we're expecting another house guest. He should be here any moment."

Bobby looked really annoyed. "Oh, lord," he said. "Couldn't you have put him off? We don't want anybody else."

There was a pretty solid statuette of the Goddess of Plenty in pink jade on a small table near my right hand, and I came within an ace of grabbing it and beaming the wretched youth. My hand was stayed, however, by the whisper of tires in the drive: through the window, I saw the Jaguar pulling up.

"There he is now," I said, and hurried out.

Robin had only one suitcase ("No point in getting the rest of the stuff out of the car," he said). I took him up to the best spare room, where Sue had lovingly arranged a big bowl of red roses. I showed him the guest bathroom, and told him that drinks would be ready downstairs whenever he was. When I came into the drawing room with the tray of glasses, Bobby and Robin were both sitting there, eyeing each other with mutual suspicion.

"Have you two introduced yourselves?" I asked, with a ghastly attempt at gaiety. "Mr.

Smith, meet Mr. Smith. Robin, this is Bobby. Bobby—Robin."

They smirked halfheartedly at each other, in the manner of small boys forced to shake hands politely but only waiting for the schoolmaster's back to be turned for the rough stuff to begin.

"I thought perhaps you might know each other already," I went on, "since you both met Tom at the Plastics Exhibition in Paris." This produced no reaction. I blundered on. "Bobby's in plastics, I know—Amalgamated, isn't it?" Bobby nodded. "I suppose you're in the same line of country, Robin."

"In a way," said Robin. There was another endless pause.

"Well," I said, "what about a drink?"

I poured the drinks, and we sat there in clammy silence. I offered a tour of the garden, which both young men declined. Their attention was fixed unswervingly on the door through which Sue might be expected to appear.

At last I stood up and said, "Well, if I don't get things going in the kitchen, we'll have no supper. Do help yourselves to drinks. I'll see if I can find that sister of mine to entertain you."

I ran upstairs and into Sue's room. She had changed into a simple brown linen dress and was lying on her bed, reading a detective story.

"Sue!" I said. I wanted to

shout, but I had to make do with a sort of stage whisper. "For heaven's sake! You've got to come down and help me!"

"I won't come down while that man's in the house."

"Don't be childish! You simply can't leave me to cope by myself."

"It was all your fault in the first place," Sue pointed out. "And anyway, I don't know what you're complaining about. You're not being pursued by that . . . that gargoye."

"But—"

"Get him out of the house, and I'll come down. Otherwise, I stay here."

"I can't simply throw him out! He's got about fifty suitcases, and he's just unpacked."

Sue was sensible enough to see the logic of this. She relented a little. "All right. Get him out of the place for an hour or so, to give me a chance of seeing Robin alone . . . please, Margie . . . I promise I'll behave if I can have just an hour . . ."

Well, there was only one way to do it: I went downstairs again and begged Bobby to take me for another ride in his gorgeous motor car.

I was gratified to see that I had judged him correctly. Nothing else would have got him out of the house. As it was, I could see the inner struggle that was going on, and I quickly tipped

the balance by enthusing in a nauseating way over the vile machine, and asking endless questions. We were all three out in the drive by then, admiring the scarlet brute. The grey Jaguar stood quietly aloof, looking aristocratic and unamused. Bobby had already dismissed it with a quick glance and a scathing, "I see you've got one of those reliable old ladies. Too run-of-the-mill for my taste, I'm afraid." This had done nothing to endear him to Robin.

At last we set out, bumping and roaring across the countryside, with Bobby humming tunelessly to himself, and me clutching the solidier portions of the vehicle and praying for a quick release. After about two hundred years, we stopped at the same pub, and this time I insisted on a double gin. After all, I wasn't driving; and the mere sight of that green lemonade made me feel sick.

To my surprise, Bobby started talking about Robin. Wanted to know how long I'd known him, where I'd met him, and so on. Most impertinent, I considered, but it's difficult to refuse outright to answer a question. By the time the catechism was over, I was uncomfortably aware that I had revealed that I knew nothing whatsoever about Robin. "Any more than I do about you," I added, pointedly. "If you knew my husband better, you'd

understand. He's a tremendously friendly soul, and he's continually issuing invitations to total strangers. I'm quite used to it."

What I didn't add was that, while it's true that Tom does scatter invitations, his scattering is usually very selective. He sums people up in a flash, and has a way of finding out their entire life history in the time that it takes most people to shake hands and comment on the weather. Robin was just the sort of person who would appeal to Tom, but I couldn't understand how he had come to fraternize with a character like Bobby Smith. I'd never known Tom to pick a dud before, and it bothered me.

We got home eventually, to find that Sue and Robin had gone off in the Jaguar. This made me very cross, and since Bobby obviously felt the same way, a bond of a kind was created between us. I must say that he was very useful in the kitchen, too. When, between us, we'd prepared a delicious mixed grill and green salad and there was still no sign of the others, we decided to go ahead and eat. I opened a bottle of Tom's Volnay, and by the time it was half empty, I had decided that Bobby Smith might be almost tolerable if only he'd get the engine-oil out of his fingernails and try not to be so conceited.

Robin and Sue came back at half-past eight, sparkling and laughing and hoping that we hadn't waited dinner for them. I'm afraid I was pretty terse with them both. Apart from anything else, Bobby had succeeded in planting nasty little wisps of suspicion in my mind. I became increasingly aware that I knew nothing whatsoever about either of these two young men. I should never have invited one, let alone both, to stay in the house. Sue and I were quite defenseless, several miles from the nearest village, and with Tom's stamp collection—let alone my jewelry—simply asking to be burgled. Later on in the evening, when Sue actually suggested getting the stamps out to show them to Robin, I could have screamed. Since by now both our visitors knew where the key was normally kept, I decided to slip it into my handbag and take it up to my room for the night.

I slept hardly at all. I lay awake for hours, wishing that Tom were at home or that I could contact him. As it was, I didn't even know what country he was in. Next morning I was up and about by seven, making myself a cup of tea. And when the postman dropped a letter in Tom's handwriting through the letter box, it seemed like a direct answer to prayer. I rushed to open it.

Tom's not much of a letter writer. This was a typical scrawl, written in the middle of a busy day from a hotel in Milan. All was going well, he said. He was just off to Lisbon, and couldn't possibly say when he'd be home, but I could be sure it would be as soon as ever he could make it. Paris had been magic, business-wise, and he'd bought me a little present. The letter ended with his reassurances that I was the only girl in the world as far as he was concerned, and sketched out a rough program of what he planned to do the moment he got home. That was all. Then I noticed the small letters P.T.O. at the bottom. I turned the page over and read—

*P.S. You may get a visit from a young man called Smith. Met him in Paris. A very bright lad, and could be important, so be specially nice to him, will you, angel? Thought he might be amusing company for Sister Sue.*

I read the P.S. three times, and each time it made me feel sicker. Of course. What an idiot I'd been. It was too much even for the long arm of coincidence that Tom should have met *two* young men in Paris, both called Smith, both in plastics, and should have invited them both to visit us. The letter clinched

it. A young man, it said. Not two young men. No, I had to face it. One of them was an impostor—an adventurer, probably a criminal, who had overheard Tom's invitation to the genuine Smith, and taken a chance on cashing in on it. The question was—which was the real Smith, and which was the phony? There seemed no way of finding out.

I was sitting miserably in the kitchen, reading Tom's P.S. for the tenth time, when the door began to edge open slowly. My nerves were so taut by then that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a Thing from Outer Space creeping round the door. I let out a small scream. What did, in fact, creep round the door was Bobby Smith. He was wearing an ancient camel-hair dressing gown, and he looked like a Thing from Outer Space that has left its comb and razor on a neighboring planet.

He appeared as surprised to see me as I was to see him. For a moment, we goggled at each other. Then he gave a sort of gulp, and said, "Oh. Good morning, Mrs. Westlake."

"Good morning," I said.

"I see you're up."

"Yes."

"I . . . er . . . I woke early, and I thought I . . . that is . . . a cup of tea, you know . . ."

"Help yourself," I said. "I've just made it."

"Oh. Thanks very much."

He sat down at the table opposite me and poured himself a beaker. Then he said, "As a matter of fact, I'm glad to have an opportunity of talking to you, Mrs. Westlake."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's about . . . well . . . it's rather awkward, really. It's about Smith."

"Robin Smith?"

"That's right. It's been worrying me ever since yesterday. You see, I was positive I'd seen him before somewhere. And this morning, lying in bed, it suddenly came to me."

"What did?"

"Where I'd seen him. It was last week in Paris, at the Exhibition."

"Well, of course it was." I was in no mood for banalities, and I suppose I must have spoken sharply because Bobby looked at me in a surprised way. Then he said, in a patronizing drawl, "I'm afraid you don't quite understand, Mrs. Westlake. Events like the Plastics Show . . . well, they attract the best people in the business from all over the world . . . people like your husband, for example . . ."

"I know that."

He leant forward, and took another gulp of tea. "They also attract a crowd of hangers-on. The nastiest sort, who skulk around in the bars on the off-chance of getting an introduc-

tion to somebody important. All of them are shady characters, and some are downright crooks." He paused impressively. "And your Robin Smith was one of them!"

"How can you be so sure?" I felt cold with fear, thinking of Sue.

"I remember now. It was the day I met Mr. Westlake. I noticed this crowd of suspicious-looking shysters hanging round the bar where we lunched. Robin Smith was one of them."

"How curious," I said, "that it's taken you so long to recognize him."

This did not disconcert Bobby. "It's the clothes, you see. And the beard."

"The what?"

"The clothes, the car, the whole setup . . . he had me fooled for a bit, I admit that. You see, when I saw him in Paris, he was as scruffy as the rest of them. And he wore a beard. A disguise, I presume."

"Bobby," I said, faintly, "I think you must be making a mistake."

"I hope I am, for your sake," said the young wretch. "I suppose it just might be one of those cases of doubles or identical twins that one reads about, but I doubt it. I doubt it very much. So if you've got any valuables in the house, I'd advise you to keep them under lock and key."



"I shall go and have a bath," I said.

By the time I had bathed and dressed and come downstairs again, Bobby had gone. My dear, comforting Mrs. Waters had arrived and was clucking round the kitchen like a plump Sussex hen. Coffee was brewing, and a clutch of boiled eggs nestled under a tea cosy, beside a rackful of toast. In the dining room, Robin—devastating as ever in a silk dressing gown—was reading the morning paper. He jumped up as I came in.

"Good morning, Mrs. Westlake. What can I get you? Coffee, tea, eggs?"

"I'll serve myself, thank you, Robin," I said.

He sat down again. When I had helped myself, he took a quick glance round, as though to make sure we were alone, and then said, "I'm afraid I owe you an apology for yesterday evening."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, it doesn't matter," I said. "If you and Sue wanted to—"

"No, no. You don't understand." Again the furtive look round. "You see, the reason we were so long over our drive was that Sue was telling me about . . ." He hesitated. "About the *other* Mr. Smith."

"Bobby, you mean?"

"Yes. Now, I don't want to alarm you, Mrs. Westlake, but

just how long have you known him? Have you checked up on his background and his credentials? I was in Paris myself last week, and I know the sort of undesirables who hang around international shows in the hope of meeting a big man like your husband. Sue is distinctly worried about Smith, and I don't blame her."

"Sue has taken a personal dislike to him," I said. "That doesn't make him a criminal."

"Of course it doesn't. I'm not accusing anybody of anything," said Robin, rather hastily. "But I understand that he has shown a suspicious interest in your husband's stamp collection. Not to mention Sue's diamonds."

"Sue's—?" I began, astonished, and then I remembered our dinner in Shinglesea. Of course Robin thought the jewels were hers. "He asked to see Tom's stamps, that's all," I said.

"Exactly. Now, what I'm going to suggest is that you'd be easier in your mind if you turned the keys of the stamp collection and the jewel cases over to me. It's a man's responsibility to look after valuables like that. Sue absolutely agrees with me."

"Certainly not!" I had blurted out the words before I could stop myself. I gulped a bit, and then went on, more calmly, "I do appreciate your offer, Robin, but I'm quite used to standing on my own feet, you know."

"Well, at least tell me where the keys are, so that I can keep an eye on them: I noticed you didn't put the stamp collection key back in its usual place last night."

"The keys are quite safe, thank you," I said, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt. "I think it's better for all of us that nobody but myself should know where they are." Actually, they were in my sponge bag.

"If you really feel like that..." said Robin, shaking his head regretfully. And at that moment Sue appeared, looking ravishing in the orange silk trousers and lilac shirt that I brought back from Italy in the spring.

"Margie, darling," she cried, "has Robin told you what I—"

Fortunately, before she could get any further, Bobby came in, rubbing his hands and enthusing about the weather. We all had breakfast.

While I was eating, I was also making a plan. I know I'm a constitutional dimwit, so I dare say my strategy wasn't up to much. Napoleon or Alexander the Great would have done better. However, after intensive brooding over two boiled eggs, I came to these conclusions:

1) One of the Smiths was an impostor.

2) I could see no way of ascertaining which.

3) The object of the impostor was robbery.

4) The object of the robbery was in the house, viz. Tom's stamps or my diamonds or both.

5) Nobody can steal a thing while separated from it by several miles of Sussex.

6) We would therefore spend the day picnicking on the beach.

"I have decided," I said, "that we will spend the day picnicking on the beach."

I didn't exactly expect the others to fall over themselves with delight at the idea, but I did think they might have shown a little more polite enthusiasm. However, my determination to keep both Smiths away from Meadowcroft for as long as possible far outweighed any sensitive feelings I might have had. I went ahead with my preparations regardless, and by eleven o'clock we were rolling towards the coast—Sue and Robin in the Jaguar, Bobby and myself in the runabout. I couldn't have faced the scarlet horror again to save my life. In the car Bobby made an attempt to bring up the subject of Robin and his unreliability, but I was firm.

"I want to hear no more of that," I said. "We've come out for a jolly picnic, and a jolly

picnic we're jolly well going to have. So shut up."

Well, it wasn't all that jolly, but it might have been worse. The sun shone, and the sea was smooth and blue, and the seagulls fooled about catching crumbs in a distinctly diverting manner. We all swam and sunbathed, and then I opened the vacuum flask and dished out ice-cold martinis, and the atmosphere grew a little more relaxed.

Not for long, alas. Young Sue, in a euphorious state of mind and a minuscule black bikini, had rashly decided to include even Bobby in the sunshine of her smile. This, of course, revived all the miserable young man's ardor, with the result that he immediately tried to muscle in between Robin and Sue. The effect of my carefully prepared picnic lunch was quite spoiled by the fact that the two men were sniping at each other verbally the whole time, as well as physically jockeying for position, which made the whole party a bit restless. Afterwards, I managed to persuade them both to go off for another swim while Sue and I took a nap. At least that was the proposed program, but in fact I started pouring my heart out to Sue the moment the men were out of earshot.

I told her about Tom's letter, with its sinister P.S.; I told her

about Bobby's suspicions and Robin's sinister offer to look after the keys. I appealed to her to help me. Useless, of course. She was absolutely furious.

"If anybody's an impostor, it's that frightful Bobby!" she said. "How exactly like him, trying to blacken Robin's character behind his back! Of all the filthy, snide, low-down tricks... You wait. By the time I've finished with that young man, he'll wish he'd gone to Devil's Island for his holiday!"

"Do be reasonable, Sue," I begged—but it was no good. However, by pretty rigorous questioning, I was able to elicit some interesting information—not from her replies, but from her stubborn silences. It appeared that, in spite of all the time they had spent together, she knew as little about Robin as when she first met him. He had not told her where he worked, or what his job was. She did not know his address, or even where he lived, although she had gathered that it was somewhere in London. He had made no mention of parents, sisters, or brothers. The only thing she had learned was that he did a lot of traveling, both in England and on the continent—and this fact brought me no comfort.

By the time we got home, we were all fairly exhausted, what

with the fresh air, the hot sunshine, and the highly charged emotional atmosphere. So it was not surprising that we all voted to call it a day quite soon after supper and departed to our respective bedrooms.

I strung the keys of the stamp cabinet and my jewel case on a ribbon round my neck, climbed into bed, and fell asleep almost at once. But a couple of hours later I was awake again, tossing and turning and brooding. I wasn't really worried about the diamonds. I could see the outline of the jewel case on my dressing table, faintly silhouetted against the uncurtained window. Anyway, the diamonds were mine, and they were well insured. Tom's stamps, on the other hand, were quite a different matter. A competent burglar could very easily pick the lock, and some of the rarer specimens were virtually irreplaceable. I heard the hall clock strike midnight, and then the half hour, and I could bear it no longer. After all, I was responsible. I'd told Tom I would look after his stamps, and I didn't mean to let him down. I decided to go downstairs, taking the jewel case with me, and sleep on the sofa beside the precious collection.

The house was dark and sleeping as I tiptoed out of my room. I slipped down the back stairs so as not to disturb the

others, and for the same reason I did not switch on any lights. I made my way through the kitchen to the drawing room, groped my way to the sofa, stowed the jewel box on the floor, and was about to settle down when a small, insistent noise made me sit bolt upright, frozen with fright. I listened again. There was no doubt about it. Someone was coming slowly and stealthily down the main staircase and across the hall.

It was very dark in the drawing room, for the heavy damask curtains were closely drawn. My eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the gloom, but even so I could distinguish no more than the anonymous figure of a man as he came slipping silently through the half-open doorway. I sat rigid, not breathing. The man moved rather clumsily across the room towards me, groping among the chairs and tables.

And then something else happened. More footsteps—louder this time—and a second figure creeping in through the half-open door. A moment of darkness and stillness. Then a step, a sudden crash as a table overturned, and a man's voice shouted, "Got you!"

All bedlam broke loose then. The dark room seemed full of flailing arms and legs, snorts and grunts and shouts, the thud of falling furniture and the tin-

kle of breaking ornaments. There was nothing for it but swift action.

With my superior local knowledge, it was quite easy for me to make my way to the door that led to the main hall, and neither of the combatants was in any state to notice my movement. Once at the door, I flung it open and switched on the light, as though I had just arrived from upstairs. At the same moment, Sue came flying down the stairs like a fugitive naiad in her pale green chiffon negligée. We stood together in the doorway, watching with interest and apprehension as our two Mr. Smiths rolled about on the floor, evidently bent on mutual destruction.

It was all over quite quickly. Robin was the stronger and fitter of the two, and soon he had his rival securely pinioned, arms behind him, and was sitting astride Bobby's angrily writhing body.

"Well, Mrs. Westlake," said Robin, only slightly out of breath, "what did I tell you? I don't think he'll give you any more trouble. I suggest that you ring the police at once."

"Oh, Robin, you are wonderful," said Sue.

"Mrs. Westlake," came an indignant mutter from the floor. Bobby was finding some difficulty in speaking through a mouthful of carpet. "Mrs. West-

lake! It's all a mistake! I can explain—"

"Now, you two," I said with as much authority as I could muster, "will you kindly get up off the floor and sit down like reasonable human beings and tell me what happened."

Robin looked doubtful. "Is it safe to let him go?" he asked.

"I'll take the responsibility," I said. "Get up."

The two of them climbed to their feet and dusted themselves off. Fortunately Bobby was none the worse for his trouncing, and soon we were all sitting round in armchairs, like a ghastly travesty of an ordinary late-night party.

"Now," I said, "I want both your stories. You first, Robin."

"Very simple," said Robin. "I was lying awake in bed when I heard somebody moving about down here, and so I came down to investigate. The room was pitch dark, but I could hear somebody breathing, and I hadn't been in here more than a few seconds before he attacked me. Smith—if that is his name, which I doubt—obviously decided that attack was the best form of defense."

"A pack of lies!" shouted Bobby. "I've told you my suspicions already, Mrs. Westlake, and I thought it probable that Smith—if that is his name, which I doubt—would make an attempt at burglary tonight. So

instead of going to bed, I put out my light and kept watch from my room. My door was very slightly ajar, and I could see his door. Sure enough, soon after half-past twelve I saw him come out and sneak downstairs. So I followed him, and caught him in here, red-handed. The police should be informed at once."

It was at that moment that Robin spotted the jewel case on the floor.

"That settles it," he shouted. "Do you see? He'd already taken the jewel case from upstairs!"

"I hadn't! It was you—!"

"How could Robin have taken the jewel case," Sue chimed in, "if you watched him come out of his room and go downstairs?"

"Exactly!" said Robin, triumphantly. "Mrs. Westlake, I really advise you to call the police."

"So do I," said Sue.

"And so do I," said Bobby.

They were all looking at me. There was a terrible silence—and then it was broken by the loveliest sound I've ever heard in my life. The banging of the front door, heavy steps in the hall, and Tom's voice calling, "Hey, Margie! Are you still up?"

I was out into the hall like a rocketing pheasant, and the next moment my arms were round Tom's neck and my nose firmly embedded in his shirt front. He seemed surprised.

"Here, I say, no need to ov-

erdo it, old girl," he said, laughing. "Yes, I got through in Lisbon by five o'clock, grabbed a plane at eight, picked up my car at London Airport, and here I am."

I didn't say a word. I just propelled him into the drawing room. The two young men were both on their feet, and I couldn't help noticing that Robin had gone very pale. Sue must have noticed it, too, because she had edged over and was standing beside him in a protective sort of way, like a tigress with a brood of cubs.

"Hello, young Sue," said Tom, cheerfully. "Having a good holiday?" He turned to Bobby. "Ah, my young friend from Amalgamated Plastics. So you found your way here. I hope Margie's been looking after you."

"Mrs. Westlake has been very kind," said Bobby, with a nasty emphasis.

Tom turned to me. "Young Bobby Smith," he said, "is a future captain of the plastics industry, and I'd say the same even if his father weren't the chairman and owner of Amalgamated Plastics. The boy's starting at the bottom and working up, and a very good thing, too. Your father tells me you're living on your salary," he added, to Bobby.

"That's right, sir."

"Most creditable," said Tom, "for a young fellow who must

be a millionaire in his own right already, eh?"

I closed my eyes. I heard Sue give a sort of strangled gasp. And then I opened my eyes again, and saw that Tom had turned to look at Robin. That young man was standing very upright and swaying slightly, as though facing a firing squad.

"Well," said Tom, cheerfully, "and who's this? Margie, aren't you going to introduce me—?" Then, suddenly, he stopped dead. And began to laugh. "Good lord," he said. "If it isn't Robin." He slapped Robin affectionately on the back. "Why the fancy dress, eh? Come into money, or something?" Robin went from white to pink and back again, but said nothing. Tom said to me, "Didn't recognize the young scamp for a moment. Last time I saw him, in Paris, he was wearing dirty jeans, a shirt covered in paint, and a rather offensive beard. His usual rig."

"So . . . you do know him . . . ?" I began.

"Certainly I do. Known him for years. Son of one of my oldest friends. You remember Valentine Smith."

"The artist!" gasped Sue.

"That's right. Could have been a big businessman, old Val, but chucked it all to go beachcombing and painting. And Robin's followed in his footsteps. How's the old man, Robin? Still stony broke and enjoying it?"

"Yes, sir," said Robin, in a small voice.

"Well," Tom went on, "I'll be frank with you, old lad, I'm glad to see you smartening yourself up a bit. Life in a garret on bread and cheese is all very well, but . . . So you've got yourself a steady job at last, have you?"

"Of course he has," said Sue. She was almost shouting. "He's got an E-type Jag and he stays in the best hotels and—"

"Please, Sue," said Robin. He sounded as though he had a fishbone stuck in his throat. "I think . . . I'd better explain. . . ."

"Explain what?"

"I haven't got a job. I haven't got any money. The Jag isn't mine—I borrowed it. You see, last week I won five hundred pounds with a Premium Bond, and—"

"A Premium Bond?" said Sue, as if she'd never heard of the things.

"That's right. And a pal of mine bet me I couldn't carry it off for a week—staying in a snob hotel, and everything. So I borrowed the car, bought some clothes, and came down here—"

"Why down here?" Sue was ominously quiet.

"Well, I knew my father's old friend Tom Westlake had his country house here—"

I could keep silent no longer. "I see," I said. "I see it all very



clearly. You met Tom in Paris, and he told you that I would be here with my sister. You reckoned that Tom's sister-in-law would be a good catch. You came here deliberately fortune-hunting—"

"Don't say that," pleaded Robin. "It sounds so terrible. It was just a joke. I'd never met a rich, beautiful, spoilt girl, dripping in diamonds, and I thought it would be a bit of fun to find one, and lead her on, and then tell her I was only a penniless artist after all. I never reckoned that she'd be a person like Sue—"

"Well," I said, with triumph, "your plan misfired, didn't it? Because it may interest you to know that the diamonds and the mink and everything else

are mine. Sue teaches English in a primary school in Clapham, and lives in a bedsitter, and—"

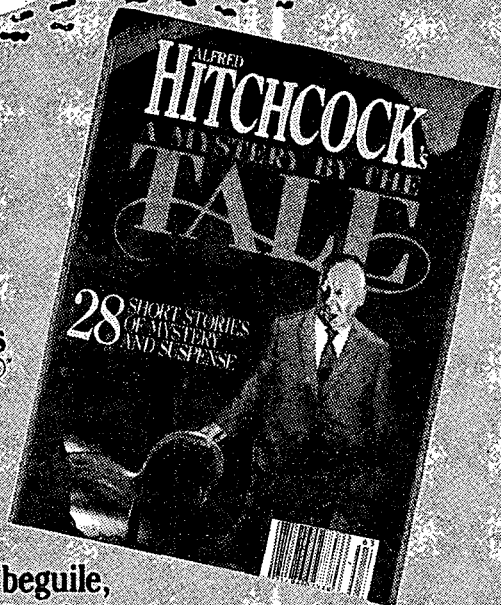
There didn't seem much point in going on because I had lost my audience. Sue and Robin were looking at each other in a starry-eyed sort of way, and the next thing I knew they were locked in the sort of embrace that was obviously going to go on for a very long time. There didn't seem anything for it but to melt tactfully into the kitchen and prepare drinks all round.

I'd hustled Tom and Bobby out of the room, and was just leaving myself, when Sue looked at me over Robin's shoulder. "You see, Margie darling," she said, "I *knew* he was too nice to be rich!"

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# Concerning Annette Fleury



by William Wise

**T**hat year, on a cool, sunlit September morning, the guns fell silent in Brittany. Soon, documents of capitulation had been signed by the commanding Nazi general, fifty thousand gray-clad German troops began to lay down their arms and trudge into prisoner-of-war camps, and from the bistros and boulevards of Rennes to the submarine pens at Brest, victorious American soldiers were greeted by waving throngs of French civilians who offered them cheers of welcome, bouquets of wildflowers, and—much the best of all—bottles of hard cider and homemade wine.

*Illustration by Trish Burgio*

Within two or three weeks of the German surrender, the liberated citizens of St. Omer had discovered that Captain Howard, the American adjutant at the nearby prison camp, was a man of authority. And so they sought him out whenever they wished a favor—local farmers, village women, a priest from the ancient parish church. One after another they arrived at the main gate of the camp with their protests and petitions, and were escorted across the dirt courtyard to Headquarters by a moon-faced giant of a Frenchman, until recently a member of the guerrilla army—the *Maquis*—who now was serving as a prison guard under the Americans.

Captain Howard's office occupied the front half of a Nissen hut, a few yards from the main gate. Among other things, it contained a small, black, cylindrical coal stove, apparently designed for symmetry rather than warmth, and a folding army desk on which he had placed two family photographs. One of these, taken only a few months before, showed the captain's twin seven-year-old daughters in matching satin hair ribbons and birthday pinafores. The other photograph was of Mildred Howard, his wife. She too was from the Middle West and was an English teacher, though she'd always taught in high school, while he had been at the university before the war.

The office also contained a second, smaller desk, with a typewriter, close by the door. Here Corporal Picard, his young office clerk, typed correspondence and duty rosters for the camp and, when there was a lull in the day's activities, took out and began to turn the pages of a well-worn copy of *Barchester Towers*, which Captain Howard had urged him to borrow and read. For during recent weeks, the corporal had become his special project. A high school graduate from a small town in western New York, Picard was unaware of many of the glories of English literature, and it was the captain's intention to broaden his horizons by ignoring army protocol and lending him—an enlisted man—a number of his own books.

Once ushered into the office, a visitor was given a folding chair in front of Captain Howard's desk. The captain would smile, say a few words of greeting, and then glance at Picard, to be sure that he was listening. For though his own command of French was adequate in most circumstances, the corporal, whose mother was French-Canadian, spoke the language more fluently than anyone else in camp and once or twice, on a sticky point, his knowledge had proved extremely useful.

The needs and desires of the local populace were varied, and sometimes bizarre. One day it might be a farmer, seeking to obtain a permanent pass that would enable him to reach one of his fields more quickly, a field that lay inconveniently on the far side of the prison camp. On another occasion it would be a different farmer, a sharp-eyed local entrepreneur, who wished permission to collect and cart off human fertilizer for his fields, the rich "night soil" obviously produced in prodigious quantities each week by what he called "the captain's thousands of Boche prisoners." And every few days Madame Redan appeared, the bustling, ugly proprietor of the village's principal cafe, to announce dramatically that on the previous evening several American soldiers had finished a bottle and a half of her best cognac—her *very* best—and this without so much as a sou in payment! Now what did the good Captain "Oward" think of that, *hein*?

Afterward he would do whatever he could for each of his petitioners—would grant a pass or issue an ad hoc "Fertilizer-Collection-Permit" of his own invention—only refusing the outrageously unjust demands or those that clearly would violate some military regulation. Madame Redan was the most trying, the most formidable visitor. But even she could be placated, and the matter brought to a happy conclusion, with the promise that he would investigate her complaint and visit her establishment again, on his *sacred* honor, that very evening. And then, with the satisfaction of work accomplished and order properly maintained, he would watch through the dusty window of the Nissen hut while his visitor walked back to the crossroads and either turned left into the village or turned right, to the farms beyond the hill.

And then, one rainy afternoon in late October, with the chill foretaste of winter already in the air, the captain received another petitioner. The office door creaked, he looked up, and saw a slim young woman framed in the doorway, a red shawl figured with yellow flowers covering her head.

Captain Howard scraped back his chair and rose slowly to his feet. Approaching his desk, the young woman undid her shawl and shook out her thick black hair. She accepted the chair he offered her and smiled gratefully. It was a disconcerting smile, shy and radiant, an instrument that could easily turn heads or capture hearts. Then, with his permission, she began to recount her story, speaking in a low, tremulous voice.

Her name was Annette Fleury, and she lived in Quimper. She



worked as a secretary in a bank, and that day, because there was, of course, no public transportation, she had walked twenty miles to St. Omer, to see her fiancé. He was a German soldier, a prisoner now. Yes, that was correct—her fiancé was a German prisoner.

One might be surprised, she told him, lowering her dark eyes. One might wonder at it. But surely such things had happened often enough before, during invasions and wars, when different countries were enemies but the men and women of those countries were drawn helplessly to each other, just as men and women were drawn to each other in times of peace.

Well, then—it was only yesterday that a friend had told her how the American camp in St. Omer held all of the German soldiers captured at Brest, and the moment she'd discovered this, she had determined to come there at once. She was afraid that the Americans might send some of their prisoners to another camp far away—that was very possible, wasn't it?—and then she would have no chance to see her fiancé before the war's end. And who could say how many years from now that might be?

There was a great deal more to it—how she first had met her fiancé in Quimper while he was a soldier on occupation duty, what he had done in Germany before the war, where he had lived and his profession, how he'd been called up to serve—reluctantly—in the army. And as she continued, the captain felt himself drifting away into confusion, into an uneasy labyrinth of feminine elaboration and Gallic innuendo, until at last he was scarcely listening to what she said.

He knew that his first feeling had been to help her, to ignore the strict letter of the law and arrange things so that her fiancé could be brought down to Headquarters, to spend a few minutes talking with her. And yet, after a time, he'd begun to feel a vague sense of uneasiness, a growing suspicion that something was not exactly right about her story—in the way she talked so fully, in her need to explicate every last detail. Concealed behind the apparent candor and the winning smile was the ghost of something else—a hidden purpose and a hidden strength—neither of which she wished him to perceive.

The captain glanced at Corporal Picard and observed his exaggerated air of indifference, his stiff back and the high color of his cheeks—and knew that his young assistant had been struck by their visitor's beauty and by the charm with which she was pleading her romantic case. If the decision had been Picard's, her fiancé would be found and brought to Headquarters. But at eighteen you

looked at the world one way, and at thirty-seven you were likely to look at it in quite another. Captain Howard sighed, turned back to the young woman, and waited for the story's end.

At last it was done. He cleared his throat and then, with a growing sense of discomfort, began to explain that there was nothing he could do on her behalf. Certain military regulations prevented anyone from meeting the inmates of the camp . . . it was unfortunate . . . (now her eyes—was it mere performance—began to threaten tears) . . . it was cruel, unjustly cruel . . . (here, she tried to manage the hint of an understanding smile) . . . but rules were rules after all, and one had to accept the fact that the American Army had its own reasons, very important reasons, for doing what it did . . . (she nodded then and, rising, prepared to go).

"I'm very sorry," he said. "I wish that I could help you. Believe me, I really do," and saying it, he suddenly found, incongruously, that it was so.

As they shook hands, he seemed to notice certain details for the first time, how warm her dark eyes appeared, a small silver ring and a gold one on her fingers, and a twisted silver bracelet, tight against her wrist. And he stood there, wavering, ready to undo his decision, but something—caution perhaps, or fear of the unknown consequences—held him back. And he said to the corporal, "Ask the guard to show our visitor to the gate," and then watched them leave, before turning to the window at the rear of the hut.

From the window there was a clear, broad view of the prison camp, the familiar view of tarpaper barracks and stovepipes perpetually leaking smoke into the damp air. Of a barbed wire fence, where the Germans huddled together and stared at the empty landscape across the road. A French guard was doing sentry duty near the fence, hands tucked inside his overcoat for warmth, over his shoulder a newly issued American rifle, turned barrel-to-the-ground to keep out the rain.

Captain Howard waited by the window. At last he caught sight of the young woman walking swiftly to the crossroads, and he watched until she had disappeared behind the bend on the left. Then, with a sudden feeling of resignation, he went back to his desk. Quimper, where she'd said she lived, lay twenty miles to the southwest. *She had taken the road to Morlaix, directly to the east.*

Corporal Picard soon returned to the office and the captain asked him what he'd thought of their visitor.

Picard shook his head. "At first I couldn't believe it," he said.



"Her being mixed up with one of the Germans. I guess maybe there just weren't any other men left in town—nobody young—and that's how it happened."

"She seemed quite extraordinary," Captain Howard said. "Not only because of her looks—there was something else about her."

Picard did not reply, and the captain said, "It was hard to know what to do, though. Bend the rules? Find him and bring him down here, so that she could see him?"

The corporal took off his steel-framed glasses, blew on the thick lenses, and wiped them off with a khaki-colored army handkerchief.

"She was in trouble, captain. What would have been the harm?"

"I don't know. At first, I was going to. But then, I began to doubt her story."

Picard stood up and walked over to the stove, poured in a scoopful of granular coal, and then swept in with a rag what had spilled over.

"Why did you think she was lying, sir?"

"A number of little things. Her clothes—they seemed quite dry. Not at all consistent with a twenty-mile walk through the rain."

"She could have gotten a lift."

"The French haven't any gasoline these days."

"A truck, a jeep. Something of ours."

"Possibly. But when she left here a few minutes ago, she went toward Morlaix—not back to Quimper."

Picard looked at the stove, and then slammed the lid shut with what seemed like needless violence. He returned to his desk and sat down. Finally he said, without a trace of a smile, "Well, I'm sure that's true—but you didn't know which way she'd go afterwards, sir, when you refused to let her see her fiancé."

"Oh God, of course," the captain said. "Her fiancé. The entire story *was* a lie. I didn't think of it at the time, but I noticed it just before she left. She was wearing a wedding ring. And whoever the man is, she's married to him."

They sat there for a while, each following his own thoughts. At last, speaking very cautiously, the captain said, "Well, I'm certain of this much, anyway. She's been married for at least several years, so that wearing a wedding ring is second nature to her. And she must be involved in some kind of ordeal or crisis, and it distracted her, because if not, she certainly would have remembered the ring. But what it's all really about, I can't even begin to imagine."

He stood up and walked to the window. By now it was dusk, and

most of the prisoners had disappeared inside the barracks, only two or three gray-clad figures still lingering by the barbed wire fence.

He turned back to the room. "How large is the shipment leaving tonight?"

"About six hundred prisoners, going to Rennes."

"Luftwaffe?"

"Mostly, sir. And a few SS, I think."

Captain Howard returned to his desk. "Just to be on the safe side, I'm going to see the major about some extra guards for the train tonight. And I think we'd better be there, too, Jim. I don't know what our visitor had in mind, but she was up to something."

At nine o'clock, the first prisoners began to stumble along the dark railway siding to the empty, waiting prison train. Captain Howard stood nearby with Corporal Picard. Rain pelted against his boots, his legs, the icy nape of his neck where his collar left him unprotected. By ten thirty, the last prisoner was aboard, and the last boxcar—one of the famous old 40-and-8's, left over from the First World War—had been closed and locked. At no point had there been the slightest disturbance.

The next afternoon he cranked his field telephone and called the prison camp at Rennes. The lieutenant in charge of new arrivals there reported that everything had gone smoothly—no trouble of any sort.

Whatever Annette Fleury had been planning—if that was even her name—it hadn't been for the night just past. When it was meant to happen, or what it was to be, he couldn't say. She had come to St. Omer for a purpose, though; the rest of it remained a perfect mystery.

**D**uring the days that followed, he had little time to spare for the puzzle of "Mademoiselle Fleury." Unhappily, there had been a new development in camp—Major Motley, the commandant, had learned from a friend in Paris that his long overdue promotion to lieutenant colonel was once again under active consideration and, not unnaturally, decided that every effort should be made to insure success, even if it meant doubling the workload of his officers and men.

With Corporal Picard behind the wheel of their jeep, the captain soon found himself traveling around the countryside—to Morlaix and St. Brieuc, Lamballe and Rennes, wherever there was an army supply depot—there to expedite a shipment of shoes or blankets,

whitewash or stoves, whatever "The Mad Major" believed would improve the appearance of the prison and its occupants prior to the arrival from Paris headquarters of the inspection team that would decide his fate.

When the captain was not scouring the far reaches of Brittany for emergency supplies, he was occupied at St. Omer with the usual duties of the adjutant's office—farmers seeking special passes and fertilizer permits; Father Eduard, the parish priest, informing him that his American soldiers were still depositing the most *profane* objects in the most *sacred* places; and at least once a week, Madame Redan herself, uglier and bonier than ever, crying justice at the top of her asthmatic lungs.

Then, on each of two successive nights, a prisoner killed himself inside the compound. The first suicide, a Gestapo agent posing as a Czechoslovakian doctor, took poison in the Civilian Cage; the second, an SS sergeant, hanged himself from a rafter in Barracks 4. According to rumor, he had ordered the execution of two hundred civilians in Rennes and St. Brieuc, and knew that he was on the point of being discovered.

The major did not take kindly to such acts. Fearful that higher authorities might consider them blemishes on his record and a bar to promotion, he flew into a towering rage, and informed Captain Howard that henceforth, as his adjutant, he would be held personally accountable for all suicides in the camp.

One night, during the early part of November, three prisoners slipped past the guards and made their escape. It was hardly surprising. The night had been pitch black, and the rain so heavy that no doubt the officer-of-the-day had been reluctant to inspect the guard posts too thoroughly, for fear of finding some American soldiers, as well as the French, hiding under cover to stay dry. And the next morning (it was not easy to keep a straight face) a furious Major Motley ordered Captain Howard to drive into Morlaix and reclaim the same three prisoners, who by then were seeking refuge in the major's favorite brothel, the one near the west end of the canal.

Taken all in all, it was a lively time. And then one night, toward the end of the month, while he and Picard were working late in the Nissen hut, they received an urgent message from the sergeant-of-the-guard, reporting an attempted break-out at the far side of the camp.

They shut the office and drove around to the dispensary, where they found that Lieutenant Hurley, one of the camp's three prin-

cipal alcoholics, was the medical officer on duty. He greeted them with his usual red, sullen face, climbed into the back of the jeep, and they all proceeded to Post 6 where the incident had occurred.

While Captain Howard gathered what information there was from the sergeant-of-the-guard, the doctor kneeled by the body that lay still, under the barbed wire fence. The captain saw him run a flashlight over the man, head to foot, feel his wrist, and then let his arm fall back into the mud.

Lieutenant Hurley stood up and shook his head. "I'll need a mattress cover to wrap him in," he called out. "And if you have some pliers in the tool chest, it might be a help getting him loose."

Corporal Picard went for the pliers and the mattress cover, and Captain Howard studied the French guard, who was pacing slowly up and down by the fence. Even in the glare of the perimeter lights it was hard to make out his expression, and impossible to tell if he was distressed by the sight of the dead German, lying nearby on the ground, the man he had just shot and killed.

When Lieutenant Hurley had freed the corpse from the barbed wire, Captain Howard and Corporal Picard helped thrust the dead man, feet first, into the mattress cover, which made an admirable shroud. After that, they lifted the corpse, placed it in the rear of the jeep, and Picard sat on the floor and held it steady, while the captain drove the jeep back to the dispensary.

Once there, they carried the body inside and hoisted it onto the examination table. Corporal Picard went back to the Nissen hut for a pad and ink, so they could fingerprint the dead man, and Lieutenant Hurley, his red face showing animation for the first time, brought out a bottle of Calvados, a can of grapefruit juice, and a pair of paper cups.

He mixed two drinks and handed one to the captain, who took a swallow and said, "It was an odd place to break out, don't you think?"

"Under all the lights, you mean?"

"That's what I had in mind."

"Well, maybe some of the Krauts are as dumb as some of our boys."

"Shot him twice, you said?"

"Yes, once in the leg, which stopped him, I suppose, and then in the head."

Captain Howard took a second swallow. "Could you look for his papers now? I'll need whatever there is, for the official report."

The lieutenant already had finished his drink. He made himself

another, and then, after they'd raised the body and pulled down the mattress cover, he began to turn out the dead man's pockets, collecting what items there were while shaking the loose tobacco crumbs out on the dispensary floor.

When he'd finished he said, "Here you are. The man's wallet, his comb, another wallet, and his cheese box. Stinking things, I don't know how the Krauts can stand the smell of them. Also his toilet paper, cigarettes, a nail file, and some change. That's all there is."

Picard, looking unnaturally pale, returned with the ink and pad, and Captain Howard found a third paper cup and mixed him a mild drink of grapefruit juice and Calvados. Then, assisted by the corporal, he inked the pad and rolled the dead man's fingers, one by one, across it, each time repeating the action against a thick sheet of paper. When this unsavory task was finished, he collected the dead man's possessions, placed them in a manila envelope, washed his hands at the sink, and drove back to the Nissen hut with Picard, leaving Lieutenant Hurley in charge of the corpse.

While Picard rebuilt the fire, Captain Howard started to list the dead man's property on a white triplicate form. In one wallet there were two hundred francs, in ten and twenty franc notes. In the other were several official looking letters, a personal letter on green paper which began, "My dearest love," and a photograph, taken some years before, now turning brown with age. It showed a woman in a summer blouse and skirt, holding a small white mongrel in her bare arms.

Captain Howard turned up the storm lamp on his desk and examined the photograph. Then he called Picard over and handed it to him.

After a few moments, the corporal said, "It's the same woman, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it is. And that's her husband, back in the dispensary."

"The day when she came here," Picard said, "she was trying to get him out. She wanted to see him, so that she could tell him what the plan was."

Captain Howard nodded. "And since she couldn't do that, she wrote him a letter and smuggled it into camp."

"What does the letter say, captain?"

He unfolded the square of green paper, smoothed it out, and began to read. "My dearest love, this is, thank God, almost the last night we shall be apart. I have done everything. The guard who gives you this letter is our friend. He has already been paid half the money, twelve thousand francs, and you must give him

the other half when he sets you free. The signal is arranged, as you know. It will come between nine and ten o'clock. Go immediately to the fence, where he will help you under. Once you're out, give him the other half of the money. Cross the field to the big rock, where I have left clothes for you. The roads are empty and before the night is over, you will be back here with me, hidden and safe. Our friend says that he is the guard where you are, and sometimes in another place, so the night itself must be left for him to decide. I send you all of my prayers, to keep you safe. Your wife, always. Louise."

"No wonder she forgot about the ring that day," Picard said. "She was afraid he'd be shipped out too soon, to another camp where she couldn't do anything."

Captain Howard refolded the letter. "But then," he said, "she *did* arrange it. And tonight the guard let her husband crawl under the fence, shot him, and collected the other twelve thousand francs."

The office door creaked, and Lieutenant Hurley came in. "I found this," he said, "in the lining of his coat." He placed a small rectangular card on the captain's desk.

Captain Howard picked it up and read it. "His identity card," he said. "He'd been living as a French civilian. For a long time."

"Gestapo," Hurley said. "The whole camp's lousy with them."

Captain Howard sighed and put the card down. "The Germans. The bloody Germans. Started planning for the war years ahead, didn't they? And sent this fellow to live in Brittany. An advance party. A spy in place—when the war finally came."

After Hurley had gone back to the dispensary, the captain picked up the card again and read it aloud. "Frederich Stahl. Naturalized Citizenship: 21 July, 1936. Residence: Morlaix. Profession: Engineer. Wife's Maiden Name: Louise Gamier. Children: None."

"She must have realized he was an agent," Picard said.

"Of course. Maybe before they were married, but probably after. Only she loved him—Christ, it happens sometimes—so she turned her back on everything else, friends, family, country—and stuck with him to the end."

"What will you do with her letter?" Picard said.

"I don't know. I haven't decided."

"If you turn it in with the report, they could arrest her, and maybe send her to prison."

"What would you do with it?"

"Burn it," Picard told him.

"Well, that might be best," the captain said. "I'd say she's already been punished enough, God knows. But I think I have a better idea."

He took out his wallet and placed inside the letter, the photograph, and the dead man's identity card. "When she comes here to see us again," he said, "I'll give them back to her."

"Are you *sure* she'll come, sir?"

"Of course, she's bound to. In another day or so. I'm quite certain of it."

"To find out what happened?"

"Exactly. What other choice does she have?"

But the captain was mistaken. Mademoiselle Fleury, a/k/a Louise Gamier, a/k/a Madame Frederich Stahl, never did return to his office in the Nissen hut.

Spring comes early to the province of Brittany; in March the air grows warm, the storms die. Captain Howard observed the end of one season and the beginning of another on long drives with Picard to Morlaix and St. Brieuc, Lamballe and Rennes, to procure additional supplies and equipment for the camp commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Motley.

As they sped along on one of these excursions, a mile or two beyond Morlaix, he thought that he caught a glimpse of "Mademoiselle Fleury," walking by the side of the road.

He ordered Picard to stop, explained who he believed her to be, and they swung around and drove back, parking some twenty or thirty yards ahead of her. By the time she'd reached them, the captain had climbed from the jeep and was standing directly in her path.

"Good morning," he said, "I think we're going in your direction. May we offer you a lift?"

She shook her head. "I haven't far to go."

There was no doubt about it. They'd found the late prisoner's wife. In her hand were several bunches of wildflowers, the tiny white blossoms that cover the bare hills of Brittany in the spring. On her head, she was wearing the same figured shawl that he remembered.

She began to walk around him, but he stepped in front of her again.

"I wish you'd wait a moment," he said. "We've met before, you know. One day last fall. In my office."

"I've never seen you in my life," she said.



"Up at the prison camp. In St. Omer."

"I've never been to the prison camp."

"And you told me that you'd just walked twenty miles from Quimper, which was . . ." (she raised her head, so that for a moment their eyes met) ". . . which was something of a slight mistake, wasn't it?"

There followed a moment's silence while she thought things out. Then she said, "Oh yes, St. Omer. I *was* there once. But I couldn't have said that about Quimper. You must have misunderstood."

"Won't you get in," he said, "and we'll take you wherever you're going."

She shrugged and said, "All right, if you wish."

They made room for her in the back of the jeep, then turned again and started down the road toward St. Briuc.

"It's only a short way," she said. "A few steps. I don't want to trouble you."

"It's no trouble at all," the captain said. "You know, you surprised me. I was sure you'd come back to our camp, but you never did."

"And why should I come back?" she said.

"To learn about your . . . fiancé."

"You told me I couldn't see him. What more was there to do? Here, just ahead. This is where I get out."

Picard stopped the jeep on the shoulder of the road. It was a desolate part of the countryside, furze-covered flatland between the base of two steep hills, a small, uninhabited valley, too rocky to be farmed. A hedgerow grew beyond the ditch that paralleled the road. A few bare trees stirred in the meadow across the way.

Captain Howard climbed from the jeep and stood by the side of the road. "I've got something for you," he said. He drew out his wallet and gave her the folded green letter, the identity card, and the photograph of a woman holding a white dog in her bare arms.

"We found these on his body," he said. "Your husband was killed, trying to escape."

"I see."

"It must come as a shock to you."

"It does," she said. And she sat there in the jeep, rigid and unbending, her lips set, her face expressionless.

"And I know that you tried to help him escape."

Something stirred at last in her dark eyes. "And what will you do now? Report me to the authorities?"

"Hardly. I've just given you back the only proof there is."

"Then what do you want with me?"

"To know why you never came back to my office."

"Ah—is that all?"

She took his hand and allowed him to help her out of the jeep. Then she turned and looked at Picard. Finally she said, "You were there, too, in St. Omer. I think you'd better come with us."

They followed her over the ditch, through a gap in the hedgerow, and across the narrow field beyond. At the far side of the field there was a long, low barrier of furze, and then a path that ran between the thorns and brambles. They walked down the path in single file, and at the end of it, inside a grove, where leafless trees stood like carefully marshalled sentinels, they came upon the graves.

There were two rows of crude, unpainted wooden crosses, five crosses to a row. The captain and Picard stood aside and watched as the woman untied bundles of dead flowers from four of the crosses, where they'd been secured with twine, replacing them with the fresh white flowers she'd carried there. When she was done, the dead flowers gathered in her hands, skirts shaken out, shawl straightened over her black hair, she turned to them.

"I try to keep it pleasant here," she said. "I like to keep it that way, as if they might see it, cleaned and cared for, and be the happier for it."

"Who were they?" the captain said.

"Ten men who lived in Morlaix and who were killed by the Germans, for supplying food and guns—and serving themselves—to the Resistance. They were betrayed and shot, almost three years ago. Afterwards, we found where the Germans had buried them, and we came and marked the graves. We bring flowers when we can—from the spring until the fall. I bring flowers each month, on the date of their death."

"You put flowers on four of the crosses."

"My father and my brothers."

They stood silently in front of the graves, under the tall trees. The wind stirred fitfully, in the top, bare branches.

"I see why you didn't come back," Captain Howard said. "There was no reason to, was there?"

"No," she said. "I had no reason to come back."

"When did you know who it was?"

"Almost from the first. There was no one else it could have been, but my husband."

"And you waited so long?"

"What else could I do? The Germans shot ten, twenty, fifty of us, for one of themselves." After a moment, she said, "I must leave now."

They followed her to the jeep and, despite her protests, drove her into Morlaix, to the house where she lived. It was on the side of a steep hill, near the entrance to the railroad bridge, which spanned the canal.

The captain helped her from the jeep, and she turned to go.

"There *was* one other thing," he said.

"Yes?"

"You didn't really bribe the guard, did you?"

"No."

"Who was he?"

"A cousin from Lamballe. A Resistance fighter, but someone my husband didn't know."

"And someone you could trust to carry out your wishes?"

"Yes," she said, "he carried them out."

"I see," Captain Howard said.

She looked into his face, and there was something in her eyes unlike anything he had ever seen before. "I didn't want my husband to think—at the very last—that it was only an accident. *It was not enough.*"

"And the two shots . . . ?"

"The first was to stop him, so that he could be told. Told everything. The second was to execute him."

After the woman had gone inside the house, they returned to the jeep and drove in silence to St. Brieuc, where they stopped at the hotel for lunch. From the glass-enclosed porch they could see, far below, the incredibly blue water of the bay. An early spring afternoon, sunlit and remarkably beautiful.

"I'll never forget today," Picard said at last. "Of course he deserved it, but all the same, he was her *husband*. And to look at her—my God—I still find it impossible to believe."

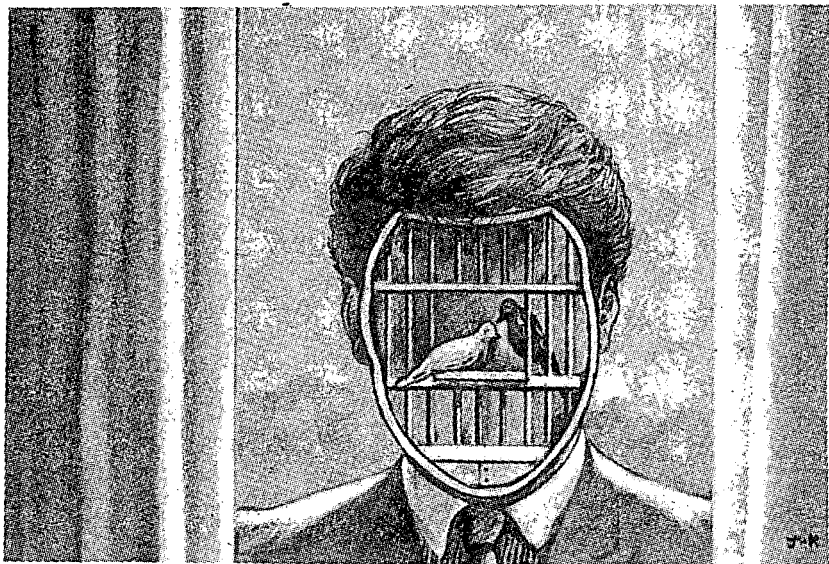
"'O brave new world,'" the captain murmured, "'that has such people in't!'"

Preoccupied with his own thoughts, Picard did not seem to hear him. But the captain, sipping a glass of wine, felt that it was of no consequence. For that day at least, even the best literature in the world was not likely to be of very much help to anyone.

FICTION

# An Unprejudiced Eye

by Stephen Wasylyk



**T**olan Garr leaned back, scrubbing his face with his hands. After a day and a half of tracking down and correcting Freeman's errors, the ledger figures and his calculator finally agreed. Freeman really ought to be arrested for impersonating an accountant.

Fiona came up behind him and massaged his taut neck muscles, her hands amazingly strong for a small woman. He

tilted his head back. Upside down, the pixie face surrounded by the burnished red hair smiled down at him. The smile was as great as right side up.

"Headache again?"

"Not yet." He knew it would return.

"Good. We can go to Haydon's meeting."

He swiveled slightly to look out the window. The patio beside the apartment house pool

below was already half filled with people.

"A waste of time. Haydon is always organizing one thing or another. Fortunately, most of us have managed to ignore him."

The probing fingers dug deep. Tolan sighed gratefully.

"We must do *something*. Haydon's idea for hallway monitors could keep one of us from being murdered. All the women are in favor of it."

"I'm surprised. I can think of a few who would probably prefer strangulation to a general knowledge of the men who parade through their doors."

She jabbed the back of his head. "That isn't funny."

"Stop worrying. The police will get him."

"Oh, sure. Collins and his four beardless youths and two fat county detectives who came in, asked a few questions, and disappeared."

"So we're not blessed with a highly specialized special investigations unit, but Collins isn't the type to give up. He'll gnaw at it like a dog on a bone until he comes up with something."

"And while he's honing his teeth, maybe another of us becomes a victim. That's why we need Haydon's hall monitors. They'll be a deterrent, just as he says. The strangler will go elsewhere."

"I won't argue the point. If the monitors make the women feel safer, I'll go along, but the meeting isn't for a half hour. Let me sit back and relax while I come up with a nice way to inform Freeman tomorrow that he should look for gainful employment elsewhere."

"Don't fall asleep."

He shrugged. "At Haydon's meetings, it's always best to arrive late and leave early."

He settled back in the easy chair, slow fingers of a low, muted pain edging upward into his skull. Again. Each time a little worse.

"We've done everything but open you up to take a look and have found nothing," the doctor had said. "I believe they are psychosomatic. How's the business going?"

"A mansion and a Mercedes are a long way away."

"I could read that as a stress symptom."

"You would read wrong. As long as I can pay the bills at the end of the month, I consider myself ahead of half the population."

"And the marriage?"

"On an even keel, which is how it should be."

The doctor shook his head. "I still say it's psychosomatic, but that's not my field. I can give you the names of a few—"

"No, thank you."

He liked to solve his own problems. If the headaches *were* psychosomatic, he'd find the answer himself, but perhaps this time the solution was beyond him.

Loaded with Freeman's records and ledgers, he'd left early on Friday, the headache tearing at him. He remembered stepping out into the full force of the summer sun and then—nothing.

The next thing he knew he was staring at the reflection of a gaunt stranger in a plate glass store window ten blocks from the parking garage. Slowly; the horn-rimmed glasses, the rumpled suit, the slightly askew tie fell into place like interlocking pieces of a difficult puzzle, and he realized he was staring at himself.

Shaken, he looked around, recognized the area, wondered how he got there and for the first time felt a fear of the headaches.

A clock in a jeweler's window caught his eye. An hour had passed since he'd walked out that entrance, an hour spent walking the streets, not knowing who he was or where he was going or what he was doing.

An hour gone out of his life and he didn't know why.

Eyes closed, he could hear Fiona opening and closing drawers in the bedroom. He

hadn't told her about Friday, even though he knew he was asking for trouble. Fiona had the temper that went with the red hair and she wouldn't be too understanding about his not telling her. He really didn't know why he'd kept it to himself except that it would have spoiled her weekend.

He heard her enter the room. "Time to go."

The headache was there, slowly gathering steam. Time for one of those pills the doctor had prescribed.

"Sooner or later, you'll realize these pills are no answer," said the doctor.

He already knew that. All they did was subdue the pain to a low throb that allowed him to function.

**T**he patio was filled with a haphazard semicircle of lawn and beach chairs.

He and Fiona found seats on a low brick wall surrounding one of the sapling beeches, young leaves and branches just thick enough to dapple the sunlight that glared unbroken on the yellow brick and window glass facade of the apartment building.

A huge U with spreading arms that embraced the pool, patio, and tennis courts, the building was only four stories high, the base of the U holding



the front entrance, the lobby, and the elevators, the arms terminating in the stairwells that allowed easy access to the so-called leisure area at the rear. It was an apartment house built, as the ads sedately explained, for young professionals with the time and the money for fun and sun and a full round of leisure activities, the advertising's success attested to by the preponderance of exotic foreign cars in the parking garage.

Tolan hated apartments, especially *friendly* apartments where people smiled and said, "Hi," as though they'd known you all your life. His idea of a place to live held things like birds chirping outside his window, wide stretches of trees and grass and flowers and the nearest neighbor a loud yell away.

Fiona had said, "But we have to live *somewhere*. They won't let us pitch a tent on the Little League field and house prices and mortgages are sky high and there's your new business and office rent to consider—"

Tolan had agreed only because of the location. The builder had dropped the complex down in a former pasture two miles away from the small town down the road, the pasture still surrounded by trees that concealed a small stream so beset by fishermen on a weekend that any fish with common sense spent

the two days under the most convenient rock.

Tolan often wished he could do the same.

Bear Lovett and his wife joined them; Bear with the body of a pro football lineman and lean, blonde Sandi with the trim body of a woman who spent many hours on the tennis courts.

"Welcome to another Sunday Afternoon With Haydon," said Bear. "Do you think the guy exists for these things?"

"He's an organizer," said Tolán. "Organizers are driven to organize. If you dropped him into a wilderness, he'd organize the birds and the beasts of the forests."

"You two are always making fun of him," said Fiona, "but if it weren't for Haydon, there would be no activities around here at all."

"Just jealousy," said Sandi. "Big, blond, gorgeous guy like Haydon has to be resented by almost all the men in the building."

"Not so," said Bear. "I find it difficult in my heart to resent a total idiot, no matter how gorgeous he is. When is this thing supposed to start, anyway?"

"Now," said Tolán. "Entering from stage left, his frosted blond hair gleaming in the sun, comes Prince Valiant, accompanied by his trusty squire."



Bear grinned. "That ain't no squire. That's Chief Collins."

"You two keep quiet," said Sandi. "Let's at least hear what he has to say. Three women dead is no joke."

Tolan closed his eyes. The pill wasn't doing much. He'd have to start taking two.

Haydon's baritone rumbled. After the first killing, security at the entrances had been tightened, doubled after the second, and patrols had been added after the third. Since the management could do no more and many were complaining about living in an armed camp, he and Collins had decided that the best solution was to have the tenants themselves participate in the security. Four monitors would watch the corridors on each floor; one at each corner of the building. Two men would have a corridor in view at all times between six in the evening and eight in the morning, since all the murders had been committed during those hours.

Tolan opened his eyes.

Haydon was calling for volunteers. No man would serve more than an hour as monitor unless he wished otherwise, and with the number in the building, not more than every third day.

It seemed like a small price to pay for peace of mind. Men began forming a line to sign up.

Bear glanced at Tolan. "What do you think?"

"I think that no one has the nerve to turn him down."

"So you'll sign up?"

"Sure, when I get around to it. No sense wasting time now. He already has a two-day supply."

"My hero," said Fiona. "Always leading the way."

"I think you two should sign up now," said Sandi.

Bear gave her a quick hug. "Pay attention to the man, love. You are watching one of the world's most logical minds at work. We can stop by tomorrow and sign up in five minutes. To do it now would waste almost an hour that can be devoted to more productive pursuits." He turned to Tolan. "Let's all go get a drink."

Tolan almost winced at the thought. Alcohol made the headache worse.

"You three go ahead. Since I've worked almost the entire weekend, I intend to relax for a couple of hours. I'll join you for dinner."

"You expect me to entertain these two for two hours?" Bear demanded.

"Dig into your repertoire of funny lawyer stories. They'll be fascinated."

Sandi grimaced at Fiona. "When you get rid of Tolan, don't marry a lawyer. Funny

lawyer stories are worse than funny accountant stories."

Fiona squeezed Tolan's arm. "The headache?"

"It's coming along real well."

"I'll come with you."

"No need. Why should two of us suffer?"

Beyond the three as they headed for the bar, Chief Collins was edging around the crowd. Defying the headache, Tolan moved to intercept him.

He'd met Collins some months before when he'd had a traffic citation problem and found the stocky man easy to get along with, possibly because it had been close to tax time. Collins had cocked an eye at him when he'd learned he was an accountant and asked his opinion on a tax problem that had been puzzling him.

Tolan sensed that the chief wished the stranglings would fade away. With only four men, he was in no position to handle three murders in an apartment house whose tenants equalled almost a quarter of the entire town's population.

If Haydon's hall monitors ended it there, Collins could use the breather.

Tolan caught up with him and fell in step.

Collins nodded. "Mr. Garr."

"The last time we talked you thought the murders had to be incidental to robbery, that the

women arrived home at the wrong moment. Still feel that way?"

"All three had tidy little jewelry collections which were the only things missing from the apartments."

"Has the jewelry turned up yet?"

"I wouldn't tell you if it had." Collins opened the car door and folded his arms along the top. "Something on your mind?"

"I was wondering why he would kill the women, even if they did walk in on him."

"They could have identified him."

Tolan rubbed the back of his neck. "How? You feel he wasn't a tenant. If so, all he had to do was deck the first one, take off, and never come back. She might have lived the rest of her life without seeing him again. Why kill her?"

"You don't understand. There are people who make a very good living ripping off these isolated apartment developments because of the lack of security. They cruise from one to the other, picking up what they can. Sometimes they get caught and we pop them into a lineup for all the victims of that sort of crime to look at, and sometimes they get fingered for quite a few, instead of just the one that got them busted. Maybe this guy didn't want that to

happen to him and also has a mean streak."

"Fine, but it still doesn't make sense to come back. Twice. And kill twice. That's sticking your neck out."

"What's your point?"

Tolan waved at the building. "The man lives here. He killed the first one because she *could* identify him, and had to kill the others because he was on the hook for the first."

"Possibly, but the odds are against you. It would be different if a stranger stood out around here, but he doesn't. Friends, relatives, and guests are in and out twenty-four hours a day, and the guy could easily be one of them. We can't stop everyone and ask for identification. You're aware of the complaints about the tightened security. These people want the killer found, but don't interfere with the way they live."

Collins slid into the car and closed the door. "The killer knows this, Mr. Garr. That's why he wasn't afraid to come back. If he tries again, Haydon's hall monitors should make him change his mind."

"Let's hope so, but what you'll run into is a great deal of enthusiasm at first, then when nothing happens, they will all get bored and in a week or two you'll be lucky to have one man to a floor."

Collins smiled. "You're probably right, but in that week or two no woman will die."

Tolan watched the car pull away. Collins knew as well as he did that the only way to stop the killings was to find the man responsible, but the chief had to go with what he had and hope for a break. He felt a little sorry for him.

He'd feel even sorrier if the headache wasn't tearing at him. Every time his feet hit the smooth cement of the walk, he winced, even though he was wearing soft-soled walking shoes.

The next thing he knew, he was sitting on a fallen tree in the forest that edged the pasture, again slowly emerging from a murkiness where all things were strange and the name Tolan Garr meant nothing; the pieces coming together slowly as they had on Friday.

He remembered speaking to Collins and watching him drive away, and again—nothing.

He felt hollow inside. No question about it now. Twice in three days. He'd call and get those names tomorrow.

Wearily he rose and started toward the apartment house looming in the deepening shadows of early evening. How long had he been out this time?

One cheek smarted. He touched it with fingers that left a stinging sensation and noticed the backs of his hands were scratched. He stared at them. Wherever he had been, he had pushed his way through brush that had raked him as he passed, and how could he not remember something like that?

Head down, depression deep, he walked through the patio area, ignoring the stares and whispers of the few people remaining. He went up the stairs at the end of the wing, metal stairs in a yellow brick shaft, a broad panel of a different color marking the landing of each floor.

As he reached the second, one of Collins' patrolmen was standing with his back to the door. Tolan wondered what he was doing there. The man looked at him strangely and lifted a hand.

"Hold it a moment, Mr. Garr."

Over his shoulder, Tolan could see Collins in the corridor.

The patrolman held the door open cautiously, his body tense. "I think you had better talk to Chief Collins."

Collins eyed him up and down slowly, no longer relaxed and pleasant but hard and tense like the patrolman.

"Where have you been, Mr. Garr?"

Several doors down the cor-

ridor, two men were examining the carpet at the entrance to one of the apartments.

"Walking in the woods. What's going on?"

"Were you alone?"

"I was."

"Anyone see you?"

"Not that I know of. What's it all about, Collins?"

Collins seemed to debate the question, the decision slow in coming.

"Another woman was attacked. Fortunately, she fought the man off."

"I thought that Haydon's hall monitors were supposed to—"

"This was before they were in place. In fact, it was less than a half hour after I saw you this afternoon. Where did you get those scratches?"

"Brush, I suppose."

Collins leaped on the *suppose*. "You mean you don't know?"

A warning tingle passed up Tolan's arms and down his back.

"Wait a minute. You think that I—?"

"Look at your hands, Mr. Garr." Collins pointed at the glass in the stairwell door. "Look at your face."

Tolan stared at his reflection. His hair was mussed, a long scratch ran down his cheek, and the top button of his shirt had been torn off.

He felt sick. He couldn't blame

Collins. He couldn't blame him at all because he couldn't stand there and tell him that he hadn't attacked the woman. Dammit, he didn't *know*.

"Let's go to your apartment for a little talk, Mr. Garr."

Climbing the stairs in the yellow brick shaft, Collins' shoes clanging on the metal, Tolan felt he was already in prison.

Fiona gasped when she saw him, saw Collins, and opened her eyes wide, sensing the chief wasn't simply escorting him home.

"Mind if I wash up?" he asked Collins.

"Yes. I want a doctor to examine those scratches first. You can change your shirt. I need the one you're wearing."

Anger was building in Fiona. "I heard about the woman. Do you mean to tell me you think that Tolan—"

"Look at him," said Collins.

"I'm sure there is some other explanation."

Collins folded his arms. "I'm waiting to hear it."

"Tell him, Tolan," she said. "Tell him how wrong he is."

Tolan sank into a chair. "I can't."

She stared at him.

"Look, I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry, but the headaches aren't the only problem. When I left the office on Friday, my mind went

blank and I wandered around for an hour. The same thing happened today. I left you, talked to Collins, and the next thing I knew I was sitting on a tree out back. Two and a half hours gone. I have no idea where I went or what I did or how I ended up looking like this."

"My God, Tolan," she said weakly. She spun on Collins. "He needs a doctor."

"He does, if what he says is true, but I see nothing life threatening here." He turned to Tolan. "Tell anyone about these blackouts?"

"No. The first happened only on Friday."

"So there's just your word that they happened at all."

"His word should be good enough," snapped Fiona.

"For a wife, I would hope so," said Collins. "But for a policeman, he has to come up with someone who saw him walking around, some proof that he was nowhere near this building when the woman was attacked."

"She can tell you it wasn't him."

"I hope so, even though she didn't get a good look at the man who attacked her. Other than that he was tall, her description was vague." He looked at Tolan. "Willing to go over to the hospital and have her try?"

Tolan's mind was settling into

its normal logical groove.

"No. She'd identify anyone from the governor on down if you paraded him in front of her looking like this. She can see me in a lineup after she recovers a little, if that's necessary."

Collins half smiled. "Black-out or not, your mind seems to be working fine. Maybe if you concentrate, you'll come up with something I can check out. Take a few minutes. If you can't come up with anything, I'll have to take you in on suspicion, have a doctor check those scratches, and see what I can develop."

Fiona placed a protective arm around Tolan's shoulders, her voice indignant. "You mean you're going to put him in jail?"

"That's the way the system operates, Mrs. Garr. I can hold him for twenty-four hours. After that I have to charge him or let him go."

"That's ridiculous. Tolan is no criminal. He won't run away."

"Maybe, but wouldn't I look stupid if I came here tomorrow and found him gone? Let's go, Mr. Garr."

Fiona hugged him fiercely. "I'll get Bear. He'll know what to do."

**B**ear didn't. "I can handle the legal mechanics of this, Tolan, but unless you can give me a clue

or hint as to where you were and who might have seen you, Collins is entitled to keep you. The doctor says the scratches could have been caused by anything, not necessarily a woman's nails, so that's one point for us. I can't get you out on bail because you haven't been arraigned, so you're stuck here for the night."

"I've slept in worse places."

"Don't be flip. You may not have thought of this. Even if you did attack that woman, it wouldn't be the end of the world, particularly if we can prove you were under some sort of stress. But Collins will now go back and check you out in relation to the three murders. Are you in the clear on those?"

"I wasn't blacked out when they happened, if that's what you mean. I told you Friday was the first time."

"How about alibis for all three?"

"Are you nuts? What ordinary citizen walks around making mental notes in case he needs an alibi for murder? I'm not even sure exactly when they took place, so how can I tell where I was?"

Bear rose. "Well, let's not worry about it now. We'll take one thing at a time."

"Not worry about it? If you didn't want me to worry about it, you shouldn't have brought it up."

"Just letting you know what Collins will be doing. I'll be back in the morning, and for Fiona's sake and your own, *think*. There has to be some residual memory of those hours."

Fine. It wasn't enough he was sitting in a cell for a crime he had no way of knowing he committed, if he did, now he had to concern himself with the possibility that Collins might hang those three killings on him. Lord knew what he might turn up and it wouldn't be the first time an innocent man went to trial and perhaps was even convicted.

He paced the cell. Like a tape being re-run again and again, he saw Collins' car drive away and a gray curtain descend:

Weird, especially since he knew damned well he hadn't gone deaf, dumb, and blind and his memory cells would have retained *something*.

The headache was once again creeping up on him, probably because he was tired, his legs aching as though he'd been on his feet all day. He sat on the edge of the bunk and removed one of his walking shoes, staring at it while trying to remember, and suddenly heaved it with frustration against the wall of the cell.

A cloud of red dust exploded and drifted down as the shoe bounced to the floor.

He removed the other one

and turned it over. Caked in the crevices of the rubber sole was a reddish clay, dried almost rock hard, that had disintegrated into dust when the shoe hit the wall.

He dug at it with a thumb-nail. There was only one place where red soil like that would have been soft enough to be picked up on his soles.

He closed his eyes. Shadows and sounds he couldn't identify chased through the blackness.

Don't do it, he told himself. Never force a memory. You've opened the door. Now let it slip through of its own accord.

He took his mind away by thinking of Freeman. The man wouldn't know it, but this had bought him at least one day of grace before being fired.

Part of the time he'd spent chasing Freeman's errors had gone toward looking for an entry that should have been under equipment and was not. He'd finally found it. The same people who had sold the equipment also had a contract for supplies, which they invoiced monthly. Without thinking, since the name of the firm was the same, the company bookkeeper had entered the equipment invoice in the supplies column, an easy error to make. But Freeman, doing the audit, should have immediately questioned why an average fifteen hundred dollar a month supply



bill had suddenly blossomed to five thousand dollars. He'd assumed, like the bookkeeper. Accountants were not supposed to assume.

Tolan picked at the shoe.

All people had a tendency to assume. He and Bear and Collins and everyone in the apartment house had assumed that the attack Sunday evening was perpetrated by the same man who had killed the three women, but it was highly possible they should be under different headings in the ledger.

The women had been killed inside the apartments, the bodies not found for several hours. The woman last night had been attacked at her door, in the corridor.

No question in his mind. One was supplies, one equipment.

He'd now opened two doors. Content, he wrapped both hands around the shoe and sat, not noticing the headache was fading, and because his mind was free, the gray curtain became a gossamer veil through which he could see enough to give Bear the clue or hint he needed.

**T**hey were seated in front of Collins' desk; Tolan, Bear, and a short, thin man wearing baggy slacks, a cotton pullover, and a battered khaki hat sporting a multicolored band.

"Sure, I saw him," said the man. "I was fishing, working my way down the stream to the apartment house, when he came out of the trees, walking like a zombie. Stood for a minute at the top of the bank and the next thing I knew, he fell. I ran over to see if I could help. His hands and face were scratched and his shirt torn, but he seemed all right. He never looked at me, didn't even seem to know I was there. I assumed he was drunk or doped up. Hard to tell which these days. I went back to fishing. He sat on the bank without moving. He was still there when I went home to dinner."

"What time did he get there?" asked Collins.

"I guess it was close to four."

"And he wasn't scratched when you first saw him?"

"I told you. He got those falling down the bank."

Collins nodded. "Thank you for coming in, Mr. Addison."

Tolan walked after Addison and held out his hand. "I appreciate what you did for me."

"I should really thank you, Mr. Garr. I had no right to assume what I did. When we refuse to get involved, it makes us a little less human. You've made me remember that."

The door closed behind him. There was that word *assume* again.

"You can go, too, Mr. Garr,"

said Collins. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but you can understand my position."

"It was probably the smartest thing you ever did."

Collins glanced at Bear. "What's he talking about?"

"Damned if I know," said Bear.

"I'm talking about the way people assume, instead of stepping back and examining what is before them with an unprejudiced eye. Alone in that cell last night, I could do that. Addison assumed I was doped up or drunk. You assumed that because of the way I looked, I attacked the woman. We all assumed that the man who did it was the same one who committed the murders. And everyone assumed the women were killed walking in on a burglar. You should throw out the assumptions and start from page one."

Collins looked at Bear again. "Maybe I should lock him up again for his own protection."

"I wouldn't," said Bear. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that when an accountant talks, you'd better listen?"

"Only when it concerns money."

"Doesn't everything?" asked Tolan. "First, investigate the attack on Sunday as a separate incident because it doesn't fit the pattern of the others. Then forget the piddling profits in-

involved in the sale of stolen jewelry and look into how much of a windfall might be involved for the husbands or relatives of Victims Two and Three. I discount the husband of Victim One because I'm sure you've already looked into that."

"You're right. The husband always goes to the top of the list. He was playing tennis when his wife was murdered."

"But when Victim Two died in the same way for the same apparent reason, her husband's story didn't receive the same attention."

Collins scrubbed his jaw with his thumb. "I'm beginning to see your point. Woodsmith is an insurance broker with an office in Haverford. He said he was on his way home when his wife was killed. There was no reason to doubt him, and Haverford after five on a summer day is relatively deserted. Since we already had what appeared to be a motive for the killing, looking for someone who might have seen him appeared to be unnecessary."

"And the same theory applied when Victim Three died."

"I can't argue that. Battle is a salesman and was in Toledo when the murder occurred. He was located through his employer about midnight."

"He could have flown in, killed his wife, and flown back, but to

check it out meant a day at the airport, or even a trip to Toledo, and why go through that when the motive was clear?"

Color rose in Collins' face. "Dammit, Mr. Garr—"

"I meant no criticism," said Tolan. "With only four men and two county detectives, all of whom have more than enough to do already, you handled the murders on the basis of what you saw. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred you would have been right. This could be the hundredth time. I'll admit that the thought that someone would kill three women just to cover the murder of one is wild, but it's worth a shot."

"I could be stubborn and throw you out," said Collins slowly, "but I've never been too egotistical to admit I could be wrong. I'll look into it. Carefully. Because if you're right and the man gets wind of what we're doing, he'll take off."

"I'll buy that," said Bear. "Electronic banking and jet aircraft have made it easy to disappear very quickly."

"That's where you and I come in," said Tolan. "It's time we citizens stepped in and helped our police department."

**H**e sat on a picnic table, his feet on the bench, well beyond the low voltage lights that

lined the deserted recreation area behind the apartment building. Fiona had only muttered sleepily when he said he was going for a walk to relax. He'd done it before.

In the two o'clock starshine, the little cement balconies swept in precise diagonals across the face of the building from one end to the other; a style spawned of high construction costs and expediency, all of the apartments identical in a repeated floor plan.

He had no quarrel with that. It simply wasn't for him. During those hours in the cell, he had dissected the doctor's diagnosis, *psychosomatic*, and had put a pattern to the pain and the blackouts. Almost always they had begun as the time to go home approached. Mentally reviewing the long, carpeted corridors with the identical doors and the low-ceilinged confines of the apartment, he realized that he didn't hate living there. He abhorred it, and something deep inside was crying in protest.

The doctor agreed. "You aren't unique. People dissatisfied with some aspect of their lives can develop almost any type of physical complaint from ulcers to amnesia. You now have a choice. You can give a psychiatrist a great deal of money to determine why you hate living

in an apartment, or you can take the money, buy a house, and live happily ever after."

When people lived in caves, one of his remote ancestors probably carved a niche for himself far removed from the others.

Strange that once you broke through a barrier surrounding one problem, the others tumbled almost by themselves.

Before they left the office that morning, a county detective had called to say the woman had identified her former lover as her attacker on Sunday. Perversely, and perhaps secretly relishing the violent demonstration of his undying love, she hadn't turned him in until the detective pointed out that she had given him four different descriptions of her assailant and it appeared to him she was protecting someone.

Also, two phone calls by Collins, one to the apartment house for credit references listed by Husbands Two and Three, followed by another to one of the banks given, had turned up the information that the wife of one had inherited a small fortune from her family eighteen months ago, a fortune now passed on to her husband.

A man approached slowly, a long shadow against the low lights and the gray building, his head constantly turning to

see if anyone was watching. Tolan tensed.

The man spotted him in the semi-darkness and stopped ten feet away.

"Something I can do for you?" asked Tolan pleasantly.

A white piece of paper flashed. "You send this?"

"Are you ready to talk business?"

"Junk," said the man. "I ought to turn you in to the police."

"Why didn't you?"

"I wanted to see what kind of man would try to make a profit out of another's loss."

"And I wanted to see what kind of amoral, greedy excuse for a human being would kill his wife and two other women for money."

"That's a lie."

"You wouldn't be here if it were, and I don't intend to let you keep it all for yourself. Put up or shut up."

"You're stupid." The man's voice was pitying. "By the time they find you in the morning and locate the evidence you say you have, I'll be out of the country with the money. I didn't do what I did to share with anyone."

The powerful light split the darkness with almost a physical impact, focused on a partially bald man wearing a dark shirt and slacks, his figure as menacing, in spite of his mid-

dle-aged obesity, as the gun in his hand.

Collins' roar was loud enough to startle every sleeping creature in the apartment house before them and the forest behind.

*"Police! Drop that gun!"*

**"Y**ou didn't even tell me!" screamed Fiona. "I married an accountant, not a whacko who thinks he's Captain Avenger! Didn't it occur to you that if one was guilty, he'd try to kill you?"

"Of course," said Tolan. "That's why the note had to be phrased just right. The innocent one would consider it the work of a crank. The guilty one would have to act."

*"But you could have been killed!"*

"Collins' bulletproof vest would have helped."

"Bulletproof, hah!" She stormed into the bedroom and whirled, holding the door. "That's it, Tolan! No more! Do you understand? This is the last time you take a chance like that with the health and welfare of the man I married!"

The door slammed. More than one dweller of the east wing would swear there had been an earthquake during the night.

Tolan sighed with relief. The last time he'd made her that angry, she had thrown things at him.

He stacked Freeman's ledgers and records into a neat pile to take with him in the morning.

There was a beauty in the figures neatly entered in the columns on page after page of a ledger. They told the story of a business as though written in prose, but as with any manuscript, final corrections had to be made. There was always an item carefully crossed out here and there and entered elsewhere.

Both Woodsmith and Battle had started out this morning under Suspects because although one had inherited the fortune, it wasn't right to assume the other was in the clear.

Now he could enter Battle under Innocent and Woodsmith under Guilty and the books would be in balance.

No problem at all for a good accountant.

FICTION

# Madame Ruby

by Dan A. Sproul



Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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The surroundings oozed dignity and tradition. Masterful paintings of the great thoroughbreds adorned the walls. Native Dancer, Coal-town, Forego, Kelso, Secretariat, and the legendary Seattle Slew poised in equine majesty on the south wall behind the old man. He paid no attention to them.

He sat alone, nursing a slender glass of fine wine. None but fine wines are served in the Turf Club, and Walter McGee had downed plenty that evening. The race was won, the celebration all but over. The well-wishers were filtering out, nothing for it now but to go on home. He struggled to rise from his chair. Too much booze, he decided. He grabbed his cane hooked to the back of the chair and planted its tip deeply and deliberately into the eye of a Chinese tiger woven into the rug.

"Excuse me . . . ah, Mr. McGee?"

McGee sat back down hard. "Damnit," he muttered. He squinted over his glasses at a kid, no more than twenty or so.

"My name is Owen Richards," the kid revealed. "You used to train some horses for my dad."

"Oh yeah," McGee said. "I remember. Richards . . . always bred cheap mares. Wonder he got any winners at all."

The kid blushed the slightest bit. "Could I talk to you for a minute?"

"I got nothin' but time, kid. You old enough to drink? Pretty good stuff in that bucket there."

The kid plopped down but didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, so he hid them under the table. "By the way," he said, "congratulations on winning the Fountain of Youth. That's an important stake, and good money, too."

McGee grunted an acknowledgment and knocked over his wine glass trying to hang his cane on the chair.

The kid jumped up and grabbed a couple of linen napkins off a nearby table to sop up the spill. "Ah . . . I just got my license," he said, blotting away. "My trainer's license. I was just wondering . . . I mean . . ."

"You want to pick my brains," McGee supplied. "Isn't that it?"

"You're the best. Nobody can argue that. I just wondered—you know—if you could give me some pointers. I got this two-year-old, I've been working her in long, slow gallops. I'm just not sure what distance I ought to breeze her. You see she's got an awful lot of natural speed and . . ."

McGee held up his hand to stem the flow. "Look, kid, this is a tough racket. Ten and twelve hour days sometimes. Starting



out at four in the morning, seven days a week. The first thing you got to learn is you're on your own. You're going to get all the blame when things go in the crapper, and the horse is going to be the hero when things go well. Sure, I'm a big man now. You think it was always like this?"

A rhetorical question that did not manage to slide by young Owen. "No. Of course not. But it seems you've always been at the top. You've won every major stakes in the country. And they say nobody does better claiming horses. Like the old gelding you claimed at River Downs for thirty-five hundred dollars. He went on to win two hundred thirty thousand. God! What a beauty that was. And the five-thousand-dollar horse you claimed at Gulfstream . . . what was his name?"

"Noble Fudge," McGee furnished.

"Yeah. Noble Fudge. You got him for five thousand. A week later you put him in the Count Turf Stakes and picked up fifty thousand dollars and he kept right on winning after that."

McGee nodded and took another sip of wine from his refilled glass. The adulation from Owen along with the wine prompted an easy feeling of extreme comfort and a certain

rare feeling of camaraderie. It was, after all, a lonely business. And there had not been, for many years, anybody to share the big moments with. "I just figured he'd like the turf better than the main track," McGee said in explanation.

Young Owen poured some wine for himself and topped off McGee's glass. "I don't seem to be doing too hot for myself," he confessed. "I've only got two horses running, one belongs to my dad. Raced the other three times. No luck. The owner is threatening to change trainers. He wants to use Peppy Bryant if I don't win next time out."

"Peppy Bryant is a fool," McGee said. "He couldn't train a mouse to eat cheese."

"I guess you know each other."

McGee nodded. "We go way back." And as he said it the memory of the early years came flooding back. The really tough times. Borrowing money to pay the feed bills. Groom, hot-walker, farrier, he did it all, up to and including rolling in the manure pit to keep the owners happy if it came to it. He took another sip, which the kid dutifully replaced.

McGee laughed. The kid, unsure of the proper response, grinned foolishly. McGee took the brimming wine up to his mouth, tossed down a third of it and hung on to the glass.

"If you're trying to get me stiff, you're too late," he told Owen. "Anyway, you got no troubles. I could tell you what real trouble is. When I was starting out, a long . . . long time ago, I found myself down to two horses. I owned one of them outright, a tired old gelding. We called him Smiley because he had a fondness for baring his teeth. His track name was Raging Duke. He was lame with one thing or another most of the time. The other was a three-year-old filly. Missy Dawn was her name. I owned half of her. A screwball by the name of Julius Packingham owned the other half. Everybody called him Bozo behind his back. He had a big bald spot on top of his head with a fuzzy fringe of hair that hung down to his shoulders. And like I said, he was a screwball. And things were tough. I was three months into the season and hadn't got either horse in the money. Out of money, out of prospects, and out of ideas, I figured it was all over. . . ."

**P**ackingham threw his *Racing Form* in the backstretch dirt and jumped on it twice. "I lost twenty bucks on that buzzard bait," he screamed at me, then ran over and grabbed Smiley around the neck and tried to choke him.

The big horse flashed his crooked smile, twisted his neck around, and bit Packingham on the ear.

"Goddamn it, Pack!" I shouted. "Quit spookin' that horse."

Packingham clamped a hand to his ear and cut loose with a bellowing scream that had every horse on the shedrow prancing.

"Just a playful nip," I assured him when he pulled his hand down to inspect for blood. "He would've ripped the damn thing off if he didn't like you."

"I must be crazy," Packingham said. "First my trainer stiffs me; 'get some money down, Pack,' he tells me. That ain't bad enough. After I drop my last twenty on your broken-down brontosaurus, the ingrate bites me. He ran like a duck. So what the hell happened?"

I didn't know what to tell him. Smiley was about as fit as he would get. He should have beat four-thousand-dollar claimers. Sometimes it happens like that; who the hell can figure a horse? Jockeys are, without question, unparalleled in cooking up excuses. So I passed along what the jock told me.

"Well, the boy said he didn't seem to like the track, couldn't get hold of it. And he was bothered coming out of the gate."

"Oh, that's good," said Packingham. "The sun is shinin', the track is dry and fast, but he

don't like it. And who the hell can bother him at the gate? The rest of the horses are already a quarter mile the hell and gone when this turkey decides to come out." Packingham walked in little circles as he raved on. "Where we goin' to find a track with an asphalt surface? So's he can 'get hold of it.' What the hell you talkin' about, 'he couldn't get hold of the track'? He's been over this track five times in the last eight weeks, you'd think by now he'd be gettin' weary of lookin' at all those horses' asses bobbin' up and down in front of him. How the hell am I supposed to pay all these goddamn feed bills you been givin' me? My roofin' business is in the toilet, you can't train my horse to win any races, then you stiff me for what little bit I got left."

"I don't know what happened," I admitted. "He should have won easy."

"Well, I've got the answer," Packingham said, pulling a folded newspaper from his back pocket. "Just look at this." He laid the tabloid atop a stack of timothy hay, spread it out, and jabbed his finger down on a particular article.

#### MYSTIC TALKS TO ANIMALS

Madame Ruby has talked to hundreds of different an-

imals. She discovered the power nearly five years ago, shortly after being released from the hospital where she spent six weeks, the result of a near-tragic auto accident.

Much of Madame Ruby's work is done in conjunction with veterinarians and concerned pet owners who wish to know exactly what is bothering their animals.

Dr. Portia Lumplick, a veterinarian in Platts Bluff, Fla., has used the services of Madame Ruby numerous times in the past. "Her ability is uncanny," says Dr. Lumplick. "If anything is bothering an animal, she can tell you what it is. I spent two weeks trying to diagnose a Russian wolfhound. He was listless, without energy, and would not eat. I called for a reading from Madame Ruby. She laid hands on the animal and I had the answer in less than a minute. The dog suffered migraine headaches. A half an aspirin a day cleared the problem right up. And there are many other examples I could give you."

Madame Ruby is currently trying to extend her psychic abilities to communicate with insects . . .

I quit reading at this point and turned to Packingham, who read over my shoulder and breathed hotly on my neck.

"This is garbage," I told him.

"Garbage!" he repeated. "You call this garbage. I'll tell you about garbage. 'Get some money down, Pack . . . he can't lose against these cheap horses, Pack . . . it'll be a boat race, Pack.' Now that's garbage." Packingham jammed the paper into his back pocket. "I'm callin' this Dr. Lumpfrump, or whatever the hell her name is, and getting this Madame Ruby to give me a reading on *my* horse."

"Missy Dawn is half mine," I pointed out.

"Okay, I'll get a reading on my half."

Julius found out that Madame Ruby lived in Miami. He managed to get her to come out to the backstretch and told me to meet them at the barn at noon the next day.

I had just finished putting fresh bedding straw in Missy Dawn's stall when Julius came in with her. I wasn't really ready for Madame Ruby. I doubt anybody could be. She was one of the two ugliest women I ever set eyes on. A blind date I once had while in the navy was the other. Madame Ruby wore grungy Levi's, not just soiled; rather, they were filth-infested. You know how some people's

features remind you of animals. Madame Ruby reminded me of a turtle. The same kind of wrinkled, leathery, long neck. Tiny, almost nonexistent ears. Very high forehead. No discernible chin. Small slits for eyes, nose turned up so far the wind could blow almost directly into her nostrils. What little hair she had was pulled back severely and tied in a bun. She moved slowly, limping slightly.

"Walter, this is Madame Ruby—Ruby Depew." Julius made the introduction excitedly, a formality to be dispensed with so more important matters might be attended to.

"I'm so very glad to meet you," Ruby said, in a voice so musical, so beautiful, it was an emotional shock to hear something so divine come out of something so disagreeable to look at. It was hopelessly impossible not to believe she meant every word of it.

"Excuse us a minute," Julius told her, steering me by the arm to a spot over by the tackroom. "Her fee is twenty-five bucks," he whispered to me. "Now I figure that's twelve fifty for your half."

"What the hell you talkin' about? I didn't agree to this."

"Okay, okay—but I only got nine bucks."

I handed him my last twenty dollar bill, which had been ear-

marked as a token payment on the six hundred I owed my alfalfa supplier. It seemed not to matter. Total despair dominated my being.

In our absence, Madame Ruby had moved to Smiley's stall. She put a hand on each side of Smiley's muzzle and rubbed him gently. He whinnied softly as me and Packingham approached.

"That's the wrong horse," Packingham told her. "Here, this is mine over here," he added, pointing to Missy Dawn.

She stayed with Smiley, running her hand up and down his neck slowly. "This horse is not happy," she announced. "He's in love. I see a picture in my mind. A black horse with pepperings of gray and a braided tail. Very close by." She swiveled her neck down the shed-row. "There!" She pointed to Peppy Bryant's barn across the way.

The horse she described was Sundown Princess, a very cheap mare, probably the worst horse Peppy had in his public stable.

"If you could arrange to have him spend some time each day with this black horse, he would feel better," she concluded.

"That's crazy," Packingham said. "Smiley's a gelding, he ain't got no ba . . . I mean—he can't be in love."

"I can only tell you what I see."

"It doesn't matter, anyway," said Packingham. "The twenty-five bucks is for Missy Dawn." Packingham went to the filly's stall and put his hand on the restraining straps, comprising the doorway. "This is the horse."

Madame Ruby moved to the young filly and went through the rubbing and petting procedure. After a moment or so she pulled away. "Yes, it's very strong. She's frightened at night and she's lonesome. She's young. Used to being with lots of other horses. She needs somebody with her in the stall to keep her company."

"Walter, you are goin' to have to sleep in the stall with her," Julius said to me.

"You're nuts."

"Just a minute," said Madame Ruby. "Another animal would do as well. Another horse perhaps, or a dog or something."

Packingham fished out the twenty-five bucks and held it in view. "Okay now," he said. "Missy has never won a race—never even got in the money. You guarantee this is goin' to make her a winner?"

"I guarantee only that she has the problem I describe. She is despondent over it. Her attitude toward racing very well may change. She seems to enjoy running, but she is a simple creature and cannot concen-

trate on more than one thing at a time. This problem currently has all her attention."

Packingham grudgingly handed over the money. I didn't see him the rest of the day until just about dusk. I was doling out what little feed was left and getting the horses bedded down.

He came up the shedrow carrying a sack. "Hey, Walter!" he shouted. "Wait till you see what I got."

"What the hell's going on?" I asked him. "I thought we agreed you were going to get a pony or a dog or a goat."

He dropped the sack on the ground. "Well I was. But the cheapest pony I could find was two hundred and fifty dollars; besides we couldn't afford to feed another horse. It costs twenty bucks for shots and stuff to get a dog out of the pound. I couldn't even find a goat. But this is better. And it only cost two bucks."

He opened up the sack and dumped a chicken out on the ground.

"Another thing about this chicken," he said. "It's a hen. We can eat the eggs."

So we threw the chicken into Missy Dawn's stall. They seemed to hit it off right away. The hen took to roosting on Missy's back over the next few days. Then I got lucky. There was a stall shortage at the

track. I had three stalls assigned, with only two horses. Peppy had more horses than he had stall space. Peppy was the reason I had an empty stall. Early on in the meet, he had claimed the only good runner in my barn.

"Sure, Peppy, you can have the stall on one condition. A hundred bucks' good will money and five bags of crimped oats."

"That's two conditions," Peppy pointed out.

A week had passed since Madame Ruby's visit; Missy had begun to come around. She was breezing really sharp. Racehorse times. It occurred to me maybe I shouldn't take any chances.

"Make that three conditions," I told Peppy. "Put Sundown Princess in that empty stall." The empty stall was next to Smiley. I cut a big hole in the partition between them.

Missy was scheduled to go six furlongs against fifteen-thousand-dollar maiden claimers on Friday. Packingham showed up in the paddock just before the horses were to parade out onto the track. I had told him she was improving, and that I thought she might go pretty well.

"Look at this, Walter," he said, waving a fistful of tickets at me. "I borrowed three hundred bucks from Arnie at

the Greek bakery." He grabbed the horse and planted a kiss on her cheek. "It's all ridin' on your sweet little nose, baby."

"Get away from the horse," I told him. "You're makin' her nervous." I sent her out for the post parade, and I went with Julius over to the rail by the scales to watch the race.

Missy had just breezed five furlongs in a flat minute in her last work, so I expected her to at least be in contention. It was a super time and good enough to win against the field she faced. But horses don't always compete like they work, and this one had shown absolutely nothing against other horses.

She broke on top, running eyeball to eyeball with another filly, the speedball in the race. They hit the quarter mile in 22.3. I started cussing the jockey mentally for taking her out so fast, she could never last. The filly she ran with began to pull up as they approached the half mile mark. But Missy gave no sign of letting up, and clipped the half mile in 45.4. She was leading by more than five lengths. I began to call the jockey vile names; this time out loud; then I could no longer speak. Missy hit the top of the stretch all alone, in front by twelve, and began to open up down the stretch. She led by fourteen, by sixteen, by twenty,

and hit the wire driving, wanting more.

Missy lit up the board at 36 to 1. Packingham raked it in. Smiley started four days later. I sent him a mile against ten-thousand-dollar claimers; he made one run in the stretch to win by six lengths and came out of it prancing like a colt. I raked it in.

Then I made a mistake. I started Missy in a forty-five-thousand-dollar claimer for nonwinners of two. She won by a length and a half, but Peppy Bryant claimed her. It didn't bother Packingham, he was peein' in his drawers when he got his half. With the twenty-two thousand five hundred dollars for the horse and half the fifteen thousand dollar purse, plus what he had bet, Julius was fixed for the next year. I was okay financially by this time, and it didn't worry me too much about Missy Dawn. Peppy might have got the filly, but he didn't get the chicken. I got Missy back three months later for twelve thousand. She went on to be a major stakes winner.

I began to pick up more horses from various owners as my reputation grew. I didn't see Julius again for nearly a year. I heard he bought a car dealership up north someplace. Madame Ruby became a steady visitor to my barn, needless to say. . . .



**M**cGee shoved his glass forward on the table. "Put some wine in there, will you, kid?"

Young Owen, mesmerized, fumbled the bottle out of the ice bucket and filled the glasses. "This Madame Ruby, is she still around . . . do you still use her?"

McGee took a sip, leaned back, and closed his eyes. "Not for a long time," he answered. "Not since after I bought her the new leg."

"New leg?"

"I guess I forgot to tell you," McGee explained. "Madame Ruby had a wooden leg. Not really wood, exactly. It was made out of cork, with a metal frame. She'd lost her leg in the car accident she was in. She was extra sensitive about it. I only found out after we were married."

"You married her?" Owen asked.

"Funny how that happened," said McGee. "Things had been going pretty good for about six months after Madame Ruby's first visit. I had her coming by every day. Tried to keep her a secret, but you don't keep something like that quiet for very long on the backstretch. Everybody thought it funny as hell at first, using a psychic to train horses. When they saw my stable swell to about forty horses, they quit laughing.

"Some of the more important owners wanted me to take their horses up north for the big money during the summer and spring. 'Course by then I was convinced I couldn't make it on my own without Ruby. I started bringing her in at night after most of the people were cleared out, when the backstretch was nearly deserted. . . ."

**I**t was really dark. Even for a moonless night. "Let's go through around the back," I said.

"Why do we have to sneak . . ." Ruby started to object, then stepped in a feed bucket. With skinny arms beating the wind, she smashed headfirst into a neatly raked pile of manure and straw left by a distraught stablehand.

She cut loose with a godawful shriek. "Jeezus, be quiet," I whispered. She started bawling, so I helped her up and got her over to my office in the barn.

"I'm not going to sneak around like this any more," she said flat out. She started to cry again. "You're ashamed of the way I look—ashamed to be seen with me." I started to protest, but she cut me off. "I'm not going to do any more readings for you," she added.

I looked at her for moment. It wasn't a good time to tell her

she had manure stuck in her hair. If I told her the truth, that I didn't want any of the other trainers getting hold of her—if she knew just how valuable she was . . . Peppy had been sniffing around lately, before I put her on the night shift. Nobody knew how to get in touch with her or who she was. But I couldn't keep the lid on much longer.

"I'll give you more money," I offered. She just started bawling harder, got up and headed for the door. I put her back in her chair, got down on my knees and proposed. What else could I do?

We got married a week later. Shortly after, I found out about the leg. And do you know a funny thing about that? It really worried her about that leg—about how I would react once I found out. 'Course it didn't bother me a bit. I took her around and introduced her as my wife. I absolutely forbade her reading for another trainer. She was happy as a clam.

For the first time in my career I began to turn owners away, I simply could not handle any more horses. I hired an assistant trainer. Ruby was doing twenty and thirty readings a day. My starts-to-win ratio was fantastic. A topic for conversation in the backstretch was not one of my horses winning, it

was one of my horses running out of the money.

Ruby never wore dresses. Not because she didn't want to but on account of the cork leg. There was on the market, for the first time, a plastic, flesh-colored leg—looked almost real. It could be specially fitted. She wanted one. She didn't talk about nothing else. So I arranged to get her fitted up. It was a big chunk of money, but I had plenty.

Well, it looked real enough. She even went outside a couple of times with a dress on. She tossed the old cork leg in the closet, wouldn't wear it again. Said it hurt her stump. Didn't think much about it at the time. But it wasn't long until things started going wrong. Nothing horrible, but I'd been winning steadily for three months and then it seemed to begin going the other way. Slowly at the start, but of a sudden I couldn't steal a race.

A month went by, no winners. Another month, only managed to get one of my young horses a third place finish, and that was through disqualification.

"Ruby! What the hell you doin'?" You tell me the horse is not getting enough to eat, that he beds down hungry. He's now up to fourteen quarts of oats. He's gettin' fat as a hog, and he runs like one, too. Now what

the hell's the matter with him?"

I knew better than to shout at her. She was the nervous type. She started bawling. Then she finally admitted what I had begun to suspect. "The pictures aren't clear any more," she confessed through her tears. "I can't read any more—it's gone."

And it *was* gone. I started risking high-priced stakes horses in claiming races just to get a winner. Nothing doin'. Owners were firing me right and left. It looked for a time as if I would be back to a two horse stable. Then Packingham showed up again, and he had a horse with him. A two-year-old filly he'd picked up at the Ocala sale.

"Ain't she a beauty?" he asked, jerking the poor animal this way and that. "Guess what I paid for her? She's out of No-double and a stakes placed Exclusive Native mare. Go ahead and guess."

"I don't know."

"Come on. Give me a guess."

"Goddamn it! I don't know. And I don't care."

"A measly eighty-five grand. Is that a steal or what?"

I took the lead strap out of his hand. "Gimme her. You're going to tear her mouth, jerkin' her around like that."

"Bet you can't guess what I named her?"

I lifted my head skyward and rolled my eyes.

"Miss Ruby," he volunteered. "It was my second choice. The Jockey Club wouldn't let me call her Madame Ruby. I figured it ought to be lucky, Ruby made us both rich. And so is this little girl goin' to make us rich," he added, managing somehow to spook the horse by a mere pat on the neck. "She's still reading for you, ain't she?"

"We're married," I reported reluctantly.

"Jeezus, Walter. She's ugly as a toad."

That made me mad. I was kind of used to the way she looked—and, I have to admit, I'd grown rather fond of her. "That's rich," I shouted back. "Coming from somebody who looks like godamn Bozo the Clown."

Miss Ruby couldn't run worth a damn. I couldn't figure out why. She had the conformation. She was ultra highbred. Racing just didn't seem to interest her much.

I still had five horses in my stable, including Smiley, Missy Dawn, and Sundown Princess—I'd bought her from Peppy to keep Smiley happy when the cash was coming in. Madame Ruby was a natural with the horses; she took over most of the care and feeding when I had to let the help go. She was fond of all the horses, but she really went bonkers over Miss Ruby, her namesake. . . .

McGee paused in his tale, shaking the empty wine bottle over his glass. "Hey, over there!" he shouted, waving the empty bottle at the lone waiter in the deserted dining room. "Bring another bottle of the same." He leaned across the table to whisper to Owen. "Give the guy ten bucks or he'll kick us out of here."

"Well, what happened?" Owen asked. "You didn't stay on the skids—that's pretty obvious."

McGee waited until Owen had dutifully slipped the waiter a ten spot and topped off the glasses before speaking. "What happened next was a disaster," he said. "As I said before, I couldn't win a race. Smiley was back to his old ways, just loafing along. I figured he'd got bored with Sundown Princess. Sundown Princess never could run; she damn sure could eat, though. Missy Dawn had a slight ankle injury, and I couldn't chance running her. Neither of the other two in the barn were doin' much. I ran Miss Ruby four times. I started her against maiden special weights; they beat her bad, really bad. So I tried her at forty-thousand-dollar maiden claiming. Ran eleven in a field of twelve. I dropped her to fifteen-thousand-dollar maiden claiming. She ran ninth, beaten by more than eighteen lengths. I had no choice. I

dropped her to ten-thousand maiden claiming. She ran fifth, but Peppy Bryant claimed her...."

"Eighty-five thousand," Packingham screamed. "That's what I paid for her. She's worth fifty thousand just as a brood mare. And you let that damn sneak thief steal her for a crummy ten grand." He wanted to say some more but began to sputter on his own rage and needed to pause.

I stood and listened and said nothing. It was a stupid thing to do. I realized I had been too desperate to win, I didn't really give the filly enough time.

"Just two weeks I'm outta town," Packingham began again, with renewed strength. "Just two weeks, and you manage to ruin me."

"You told me to put her where she could win," I said in my own defense.

"Yeah, sure, I'm so goddamn dumb I believe you will use good judgment. What the hell you doin' anyway? Didn't Madame Ruby give you a reading? Don't tell me the horse had a complex about running for more than ten thousand."

I had neglected to tell Julius that Madame Ruby could no longer read a horse, or anything else for that matter. Reasoning, at the time, that if he knew she'd lost her ability, he

wouldn't let me keep the horse.

There wasn't much point in hiding it from him any longer, so I told him. He didn't take it like I thought he would.

"But that's impossible," he said, then put the palm of his hand on his bald spot and walked around in a loose circle, deep in thought. It was his way. He might have looked like a clown, but Julius had a sharp and devious mind, even though he was a screwball.

He stopped short and took his hand off his head. "What changed?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"What changed?" he repeated. "Something must have changed. Was she on pills—how about her diet?"

We talked about it for an hour or more. He kept probing. It was hard to pinpoint just when she lost the power, but it wasn't long after we got married, and if it wasn't the marriage itself, it had to be after she got her new leg. The longer we kicked the idea around, the more sense it made. And it was easy to check.

"But I don't want to put it back on. It hurts if I wear it any length of time."

"Ruby, please," I pleaded. "Just try it. Try it on Smiley—just twenty minutes."

Smiley whipped his head back and forth and grinned his grin.

Ruby gentled him and slid a hand down his neck. Julius and me stood back and prayed. She worked a hand down his forehead to his muzzle. She stood motionless for a second, then backed away.

"Okay, what?" Packingham prompted.

Ruby smiled. "He has terrible pain in his right front hoof."

I grabbed a paring knife and rushed into the stall. I made a small cut in the frog of his hoof. The pus oozed out; it was badly infected. I had noticed he was favoring the leg but couldn't figure out why, there was no heat in his leg. But Ruby got it right from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

Packingham made plans to get his horse back from Peppy Bryant. Miss Ruby was entered at twenty-five-thousand maiden claiming the next afternoon, and Julius already had the claim slip filled out. I was ecstatic. I could see myself back on top again.

Ruby went about things as usual. She was spending a lot of her time at Peppy Bryant's stable to be near Miss Ruby, especially after hours. Except for that, maybe things would have turned out different. She sure loved that horse.

Peppy ran her off from his barn a couple of times. I guess he thought she was spying or

something. He moved Miss Ruby to a box stall on the other side of his barn. A stall with a wooden Dutch door that he locked at night when Ruby liked to visit the horse. Funny how little things like that can change everything. . . .

**M**cGee's voice faltered. A single tear slid down his face. He quickly brushed it away and reached for his wine. He took a sip, then exhaled mightily as if he had just let go of a heavy weight, allowing it to thud to the floor.

"You okay, Mr. McGee?"

McGee fixed his eyes on young Owen for several seconds before speaking. "Yes . . . sorry. I haven't thought about it for so long . . . it was just . . ." He trailed off without finishing.

"Well . . . ah, did you get Miss Ruby back?" Owen prompted.

McGee bowed his head, shook it from side to side. "No," he answered. He produced a handkerchief and mopped his eyes. "We didn't get her back."

Owen sensed the old man was floundering in a floodtide of emotion. Instinctively he sat in silence, allowing McGee to continue at his own pace.

McGee collected himself quickly. "There was a fire," he explained. "Not a big fire. Peppy had some hay and tack stored

in the stall next to Miss Ruby. It started there. Madame Ruby discovered the barn was on fire. She sent a passerby to get security. Peppy had the only key to Miss Ruby's stall. He was away from the track. Ruby tried to put out the fire first, but evidently it had already burned through the stable wall into Miss Ruby's stall. I could hear the filly screaming inside the stall clear over in my barn."

McGee took another deep breath. "She broke the lock somehow, but the horse was already down with the smoke. When I got there she was inside trying to drag Miss Ruby out. All four walls were ablaze, the bedding straw was burning." McGee paused to wipe a tear, this time with no attempt to hide it. "Ruby's clothes were on fire. You could . . . ah . . . you could smell flesh burning. It all happened in seconds. There were a couple of guys holding onto me, but I got loose and started in. Couldn't see anything. It was just a wall of flame. I don't remember much after that. They say a beam came loose and cracked me on the head. I fell partway out of the stall. They dragged me the rest of the way out."

"I'm sorry . . ." Owen managed feebly.

McGee made an attempt to ease young Owen's discomfort.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "I don't think about it much any more."

"One thing about it," Owen said. "You've been on top for a long, long time, but Peppy Bryant only has three or four horses in his barn, just cheap claimers at that."

McGee smiled. "Yes . . . because if he gets a good one, I claim it if I can. If he tries to win a top race, he's always got to beat my horse. He's not able to do it very often. So over the years I've taken him down from one of the top public stables in the country to a two-bit operation."

Owen nodded. "Everybody knows you two don't like each other much. I don't think anybody knows why, though. They say he even moved his string to California a couple of years ago, and you followed him."

"I'm going to put him out of business," said McGee.

Owen pushed his glass in little circles on the fine linen. "And you managed to stay on top without . . . er, without . . ."

Owen found it difficult to finish the thought.

"Without Madame Ruby?" McGee finished for him.

Owen nodded.

"Not really. I didn't tell you the rest of the story. I was in the hospital for several weeks. I got burned pretty bad. Especially my legs. The right leg couldn't be saved. They took it off at the knee."

Owen's eyes grew large.

"Take a look," McGee offered, rolling up his pants leg. The leg was old and battered, big chunks of cork were missing. "It's really too short, and hurts like hell—I have two others I use for day-to-day stuff. For feature races, I wear this one right up to the weigh-in scale—didn't get a chance to change today."

McGee rolled the pants leg down, grabbed his cane off the back of the chair, and struggled to his feet. "Were you telling the truth about Peppy getting your filly?" he asked.

Owen nodded.

"I'll be down to your barn tomorrow to give you a reading."

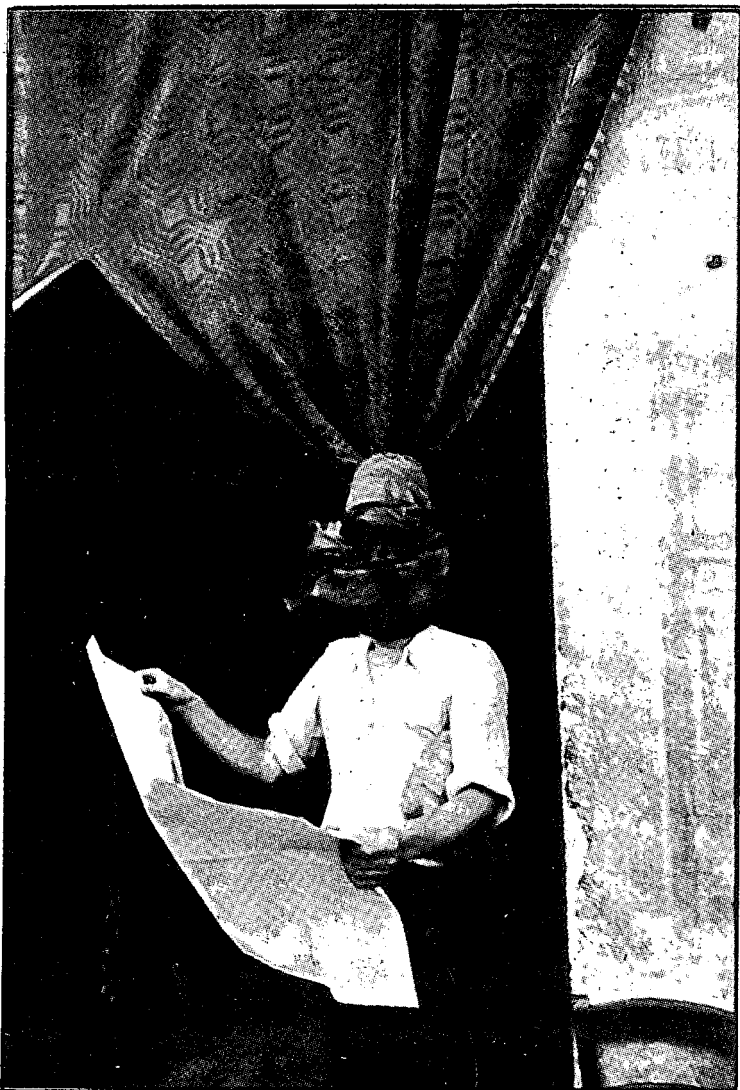


# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



© N. Jay Jaffee

Or Photographs, actually. Three of them, in honor of AHMM's thirtieth birthday. The contest rules are the same, though: we will give a prize to the person who invents the best mystery story in 250 words or less (be sure to include a crime, please) based on these three photographs. NOTE: That's *one* story using all three photos. We're not sure if that makes it harder or easier, but we've also tripled the prize—it's \$75 this time—plus the winning story will be printed, as always, in a future issue of the magazine.



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The photos, by the way, can be used in any order.

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Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017. And good luck!

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The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



FICTION

# Homecoming

by Doug Allyn

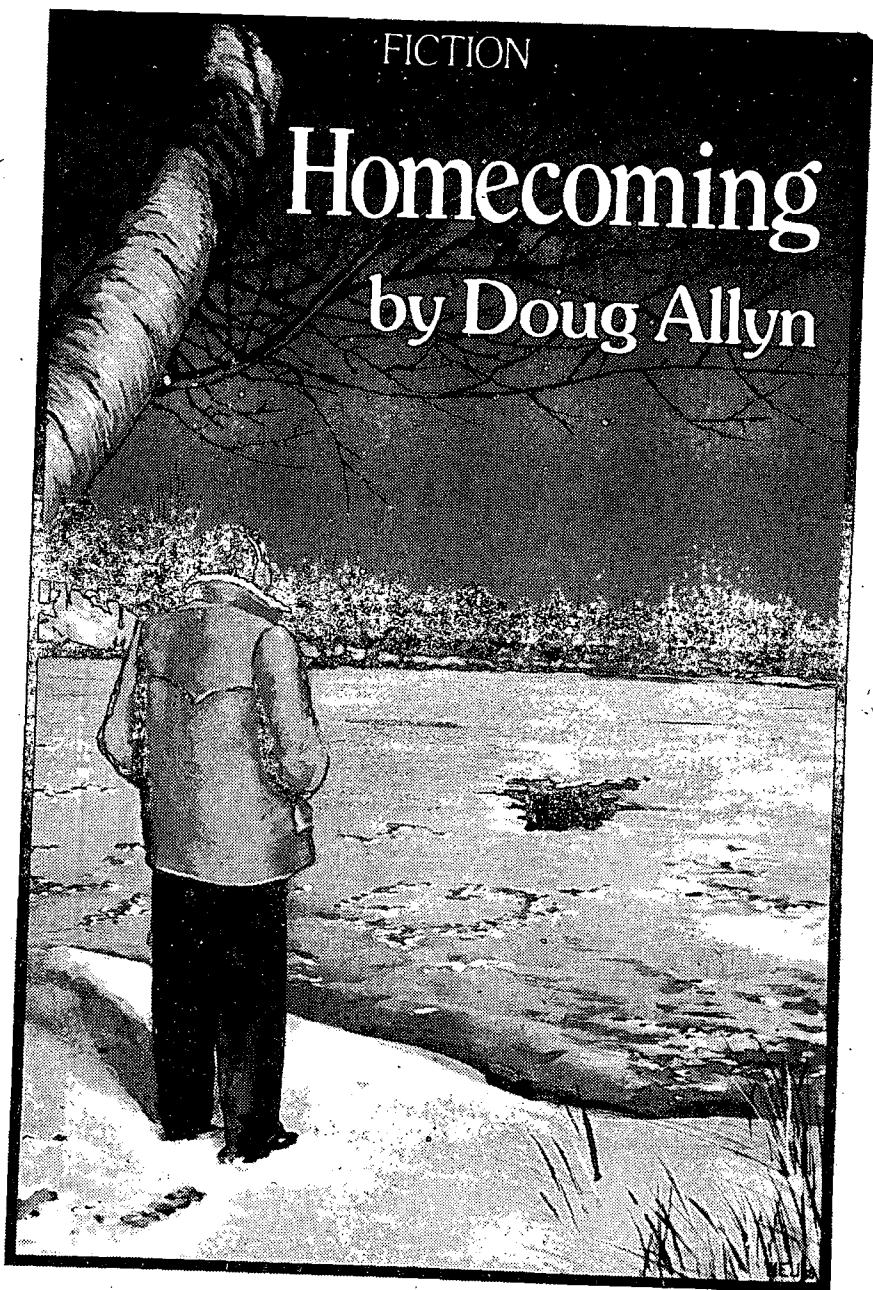


Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

**G**ridlock. Ten thousand homeward bound T.G.I.F. commuters jammed bumper to bumper in the Cass Corridor, trapped by an overturned auto-hauler, re-breathing exhaust fumes, serenaded by siren howls and air horns echoing down the urban canyon walls. Autumn in Detroit.

The cordless phone on the dash console gave an electronic burp, barely audible in the din. I considered ignoring it, but that's one of the drawbacks to mobile phones. You can't tell people you were in the shower.

"Drug Enforcement," I sighed into the handset. "Dukarski."

"Duke, I got a Helen Newell on line two, said something about being your wife, but—"

"Ex-wife," I said, feeling an icy fist clench around my heart. "Patch her through."

"Ronnie?"

"Helen, what's wrong? Is Melissa—?"

"No, no, she's fine, Ronnie, but ah, I'm afraid I do have bad news. Ronnie, Gus LaBreque died today."

"Damn," I said softly, feeling guilty relief that my daughter was safe, mingled with the sense of loss for Gus. "What was it, his heart?"

"No, he—Ronnie, he drowned. In the river at Hartland Park."

"Drowned? What the hell do

you mean he drowned? It's November for chrissake!"

"He apparently took his own life. Just walked out on the ice and went through. His hat and coat were on the bank."

"No," I said, "he wouldn't do that. He—"

"Ronnie, he had cancer. I don't know which type, I'm working in pediatrics now, but I understand it was inoperable. He's been very ill."

"Are you sure—I mean, hell, have they recovered the body?"

"Yes. It was downstream, of course, under the ice, but . . . yes. There's no doubt."

"No," I said, "I suppose not."

"Will you be coming up, do you think, for the funeral?"

"I don't know, I . . . Yes. I guess I will."

"I'm afraid you'll miss Melissa. She's at my mother's this week."

"Why at your mother's?"

"It's deer season, Ronnie. You know how crazy it gets up here then. Ray and I are both pulling double shifts, and—"

"Okay, okay," I said, "I forgot. Deer season doesn't mean much in Detroit. It's open season down here all year round. Sorry, I didn't mean to bite your head off."

"That's okay. I'm sorry the news wasn't better. If you, ah, need a place to stay, I could ask Ray—"

"No, I appreciate the offer, but I'll manage. Tell Melissa . . . well, you know. Thanks for letting me know, Helen."

"Ronnie, I'm really sorry about Gus. I know how you felt about him."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, too. Good-bye, Helen."

I listened to the empty line for a minute, then tapped out the series for my office and asked the dispatcher to get me on the first flight north to Algonquin. He called back with a confirmed reservation before I'd inched a half block through the jam. Maybe there's something to be said for mobile phones at that.

The pilot of the Northways Commuter banked the six-passenger Cherokee sharply as he began his initial approach to the postage-stamp airport, giving us a panoramic view of Algonquin fifteen hundred feet below. At first glance the town seemed asleep, an enchanted village dreaming on the shores of Lake Michigan. I felt a catch in my throat, the phase-shift of time travel, a return to the past. It disappeared as we made the final pass over the town, erased by the bustle of traffic below, new construction in the suburbs, and a nearly completed shopping mall, its parking lot as busy as any in Detroit.

Thomas Wolfe was right. You can't go home again.

I rented a compact Ford sedan at the airport, tossed my permanently packed suitcase into the trunk, and drove into Algonquin. As I turned onto Decatur Avenue some six blocks short of the business district, I felt an increase in the tension that had been building in me since Helen's call the day before. I'd been gone a long time, but the street hadn't changed at all.

The sharp tang of burning leaves hung in the air as I drove beneath an arch of overhanging oak branches into the 1960's. A wide boulevard, lined with graceful, century old trees, two story brick and clapboard houses set on lawns broad enough for touch football games. Kids were chasing each other pell-mell down sidewalks lightly dusted with an early snow in front of solid, sensible homes, individually designed. The kind they don't build any more. And in the middle of the third block, the LaBreque house, a colonial brownstone with dormers off the upstairs bedrooms, not so different from its neighbors but very special to me. I'd lived here, had my own room here, since I'd turned fourteen, the first day I was old enough to apply for a job as a stockboy at LaBreque Maritime Fabricating.

I'd worn my best suit for my job interview with Gus, a Salvation Army special, two sizes too small. I was also wearing a Technicolor shiner, a gift from my Uncle Stanley. Gus casually conned me out of my life story, and offered me a job and a new home the same day. The conference he had with my uncle left them both looking worse than I did, no mean feat considering that Uncle Stan was grizzly-sized with a disposition to match and Gus was a bantam-weight the wrong side of fifty. But somehow Gus managed it. And he convinced me that I'd be doing him a favor by filling the spare bedroom in a home already complete with a wife and three boys of his own. He made me feel welcome, like family. But in the end I let him down. And killed one of his sons.

I swung the rental Ford into the cobbled driveway, followed it around to the paved circle behind the house, and parked facing the rambling three-car garage that probably housed carriages once, or Stanley Steamers. Nearly a dozen cars were parked there already, a mixed bag ranging from a Mercedes 450SL to a battered Chevette.

I rapped gently on the back door, and then again. Chris LaBreque, Gus's youngest surviving son, opened the door. He

stared at me for an age, his watery blue eyes blinking in the glare of the afternoon sun. He slowly shook his head.

"Ronnie Duke," he said softly, "I'll be goddamned."

"Hello, Chris. I, ah, I heard about Gus. I've come to pay my respects."

He stared at me hazily, as though he hadn't heard, and I realized he was already middling drunk. The years hadn't been kind to Chris. His baby-fine blond hair had thinned and his narrow face was fleshy, with permanent bruises under his eyes. He was dressed casually, a muted tweed sport coat over a chambray shirt, faded Levi's, no tie, a drink and a cigarette in one hand. He was two years younger than I and I remembered him as a happy kid, wiry and quick and full of energy. He had a paunch now and didn't look like he could manage a jog around the block.

"Well," I said at last, "can I come in?"

"What the hell," he said, swinging the door wide with an ironic bow, "why not? I don't know half the people here anyway, so what's one more stranger? Come on in."

I followed him through the oak and brick colonial kitchen into the living room, a large comfortable room done in earth tones and filled with people in dark suits and somber dresses



making subdued small talk. I remembered a few neighbors, friends of the family, vaguely, from years before, but most of them were strangers to me. Dr. Alan LaBrequé, the eldest son, was across the room, nodding earnestly as an elderly gentleman poured out quiet anguish. Alan looked good, tall and trim, a decade older, of course, his sandy hair a little thinner, but essentially unchanged.

"Behold," Chris said loudly, "the prodigal returneth."

Alan glanced over his shoulder at me, and then again, his eyes widening in shock and recognition. He muttered an excuse to the old man and walked slowly toward me, his face unreadable. Conversation in the room seemed to dwindle away.

"Hello, Alan," I said quietly, offering my hand. He didn't seem to notice.

"Ronnie, you sonofagun," he said softly. He brushed my hand aside and embraced me, hugging me hard for what seemed a long, long time. "Damn," he murmured, "if I'd known a funeral would bring you home I'd've strangled Chris a long time ago." He stepped back, his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length. "You look terrible," he said matter-of-factly. "In my professional opinion, we both need a drink."

"Alan, I'm sorry about Gus."

"I know, I know," he nodded,

his eyes a little misty, as mine were. "We'll, ah, we'll talk. God, it's good to see you. Come on, there's booze in the den."

"You go ahead," I said, "I should—"

"Ronalt." Klara LaBrequé's voice cut through the buzz of conversation with effortless authority. "*Komm zu mir.*"

And I responded as I always had, as we all had, with instant obedience.

She was seated in an overstuffed leather armchair, clad in a timeless silken mourning dress, surrounded by a cluster of elderly friends. Klaus, her black mongrel wolfhound, was dozing with his great scarred head in her lap. She'd aged very little, and elegantly, her silver hair haloing a finely boned face that probably hadn't changed greatly since Gus brought her home from Germany as a war bride in 1946, the only good thing to come of that war, or any other, he always said. She was his mate, his friend, partner and confidante through the years, the only one who could quiet him with a word, and the rest of us with a glance. And she was the person I'd most feared seeing again. She'd borne Gus three sons. And now there were two.

She rose as I approached, brushing the dog impatiently aside. Klaus grumbled and shook his head, eyeing me sus-

piciously. Then he stiffened, slowly turning to face me, the ruff on his shoulders coming erect. And then with a *whuf* he leapt at me, exploding into motion, cannoning into my midsection, driving me to my knees on the carpet, bounding around me like a puppy, licking at my face. A ripple of laughter ran through the room, but something seemed to give way in me and suddenly I was crying. I hid my face in the dog's grizzled mane and hot tears were streaming silently, unbidden, uncontrolled. I was on my knees in a roomful of strangers, weeping like a child, and I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop.

"Down, Klaus," Klara said firmly. "Ronalt, you come with me."

Somehow I managed to stumble to my feet, and the dog and I followed her into the kitchen. She closed the door firmly behind her, leaning against it for a moment. Then she turned and passed me a handkerchief. It smelled of jasmine, and of my childhood. She snapped her fingers and Klaus collapsed at her feet, panting, gazing up at me, his massive tail giving an occasional thump.

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment, trying to get my breathing under control, "I'm sorry for everything."

"I know," she nodded. "Are you all right now?"

"I think I'm supposed to ask you that," I said.

"Perhaps so," she sighed, "it doesn't matter. Where have you been?"

"Been?" I said, surprised. "I only heard yesterday, I—"

"No, no," she said, irritated, "I mean these past months. I've been trying to contact you since July, since . . . Gustaf learned of the cancer." /

"I didn't know," I said. "I'm assigned to Detroit but I move a lot. Bogotá, Mexico City. I didn't get your message. I'm sorry."

"This job you have, you are a policeman?"

"Sort of. I work for the Drug Enforcement Administration. Narcotics."

"And are you good at your work?"

"I think so," I said. "It can be a game sometimes, like chess."

"You could never be a chess master, Ronalt," she said dryly, "but you might be good at tipping over the board."

I searched her face for a hidden meaning, but found none. I always had to take what Klara said at face value. No choice. "Yes," I acknowledged, "I suppose that's exactly what I do."

"Your . . . wife has remarried. To Raymond Newell, also a policeman. Did you know this?"

"Yes," I said, "I heard."

"He means well, I think," she

said, "but he will not listen to me. So you must help me, Ronalt."

"I don't understand. Help you with what?"

"They told you what happened? That Gustaf walked into the river? That he committed suicide?"

"*Mutti*," I said carefully, "I know the idea may be difficult to—"

"Don't patronize me, Ronalt," she snapped, "I'm not senile. I have no difficulty accepting the *idea* of suicide. We discussed it, of course."

"You discussed it?" I echoed stupidly.

"Certainly. The cancer was of the prostate and lower bowel, and it had metasta—" she stumbled over the unfamiliar word—"it was spreading. Gus was in pain, but not so bad yet. And later, if it became too much, he had no intention to wait for death. He was eighty-one, Ronalt. He did not fear it."

"Perhaps he didn't wait. Maybe the pain was worse than you thought."

"No," she said stubbornly. She took a deep, ragged breath, her eyes locked on mine. "I show you something," she said abruptly.

She walked stiffly to the counter, removed a jar from the well-stocked spice rack and handed it to me. It was unlabeled. I unscrewed the cap and

spilled the contents on the table. Red and yellow capsules. About fifty of them.

"Do you know what they are, Mr. Policeman?" she asked.

"They look like Dalmane," I said. "Thirty milligram caps."

"They are sleep," she said, "eternal. You say goodnight to your loved ones and 'angels sing thee to thy rest.' Could the pain have been so bad, do you think, to send Gustaf into that terrible river when he had only to walk another half mile to home? To sleep? To me?"

I had no reply.

"And besides," she added, "he had not said goodbye to you yet. Or any of us. He would not have done this thing without saying goodbye. And he did not."

"Perhaps not," I conceded, "but if the local police—"

"But you would care, Ronalt. That could make a difference."

"All right," I said reluctantly, "I suppose I can look into it. No promises, though."

"*Gut*," she said, "you try. That is all I ask. Now wash your face. We will drink some brandy and have a good cry, but later. We will cry later."

I peeled off my jacket, turned on the tap and splashed water in my face over the kitchen sink, feeling the icy coolness soothe my eyes. Klara passed me a hand towel.

"There is something you may wish to consider," I said, drying

off. "If it wasn't suicide, it probably wasn't an accident, either. Are you sure you—?"

"Of course I'm sure," she said fiercely. "Has this job of yours turned everything gray for you? Gus was a good man. He was good at loving and life. And even after forty years he was good to be with. And if anyone, *anyone* has robbed me of one minute with him, I want to know it. And so should you!"

"I just wanted to be sure you understand the implications."

"To hell with your implications! Just do this thing for me. For Gus. See to it. Now you must excuse me. I have guests who need someone to comfort." She opened the door, then paused a moment, frowning. "There is something else you should know about this, Ronald. Gus never blamed you for what happened to Harry. Never. He loved you. He wanted to give the factory to you."

"What do you mean, give it to me?"

"Exactly that. He had offers to sell out, but he wanted to keep the business in the family. Alan has his own practice, and Chris has no head for business. But you, you grew up in it. If you'd agreed to run it, he was going to give it to you."

"My God," I said softly.

"Yes," she nodded, a flicker of satisfaction playing around her mouth.

"Did, ah," I coughed, "did anyone else know about this?"

"I should think many people. The boys did. Gus discussed it with them. He was not a man for secrets, Gus. I often wondered how he did so well in business. He was such an—open book. An unfinished book," she added bitterly.

"I'll do what I can," I said.

"Yes," she said, "I know you will."

The door clicked quietly closed behind her. I waited a while, listening to the low murmur of conversation from the living room, trying to absorb what she'd told me. Too much. It was just too much. The only thing I came up with was that maybe Thomas Wolfe was full of crap. Maybe there's a time when you can go home again. If you just don't wait too long.

Alan was alone in the den, staring out the picture window that overlooked the street, sipping a tall scotch. He glanced over his shoulder as I came in.

"Booze is where it was," he said, without turning. "Help yourself."

The room was as I remembered it, a narrow, high-ceilinged garret, its walls lined with books and blueprints, lit by a huge brass chandelier Gus had fabricated at the plant. His desk was the same, a cheap

light oak crackerbox rescued from an abandoned school, its carved, dark-penciled graffiti painstakingly preserved beneath a dozen coats of clear lacquer. Gentle obscenities from another century. Only the computer in the corner was new. And the sense of desolation. The room's master would not be returning. And for the first time I felt an inkling, just a hint, of what Klara must be feeling. I built myself a bourbon and water and took a long deep pull. Cool fire.

"She told you what she thinks, didn't she," Alan said. "All of it." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said, "she did."

"I don't know how much experience you've had with this sort of thing," he said, "in your work, I mean. It's often extremely difficult for the family of a suicide victim to accept the death. And the rejection it implies."

"Is that what you think?" I said, perching on the edge of the desk, "that Klara's hysterical?"

"I think she's terribly upset," he said, turning to face me, "beyond that, I can't comment. I'm forbidden by law to practice surgery on my mother, let alone psychiatry. And I don't think you should practice your trade either for the same reason. You lack objectivity."

"She said the police won't help."

"Of course they won't, and for good reason!" he flared. "Look, I'm not going to debate this with you, Ronnie. For one thing, if someone *did* push him into that river, which I don't believe for a second, they did him a favor. His cancer was the worst a man can have. The worst." He took an angry gulp of his scotch, baring his teeth against the bite of it.

"Besides, for what it's worth, I'm not a disinterested party. She must have told you I opposed his giving the shop to you, that I wanted him to sell out."

"No," I said; "she didn't tell me that."

"Well then, I'm telling you. Nothing against you personally, Ronnie, you know that. Hell, we were like brothers once. But the shop is worth a lot of money, money I could use to improve health care in this area with a clinic of my own. All Dad's done for years is contract work for the Navy Department. I think it's time to put that sort of thing behind us, to make a more positive contribution."

"There was a time," I said, "when you didn't find those defense contracts so inconvenient."

"By God," he said, paling, "there was a time when I had two brothers, too. Real brothers, I mean."

"Is this a private scrap," Chris said from the doorway, "or can I put the boots to whoever goes down first, like the old days?" Klaus bolted past him into the room, loped over to the desk and sat down, resting his head on my knee, staring up at me with frank curiosity. "You've got one friend at least," Chris said, drifting over to the liquor cabinet, "looks like you might need one, too. What's all the noise about?"

"Mom's sold Ronnie her conspiracy theory," Alan said bitterly. "You'd better watch your mouth. You're probably a suspect."

"No kidding?" Chris said. He sauntered over to me, sipping his drink. "Well, what the hell, Ronnie, shouldn't you be down at the park looking for clues or something? Or do we get the third degree first?"

"Did you murder your father, Chris?" I asked.

"Did I—?" His eyes widened in shock. "Jesus H. Christ, Dukarski," he said, grinning, "you're a kick, you know that? You always were. Should I just confess or do you wanna beat me up a little first?"

"For God's sake!" Alan snapped, "how can you joke about a thing like this? Isn't anything—ahh, the hell with you! With both of you!" He slammed his empty glass down on the desk and stalked out of

the room, banging the door closed behind him.

"The good doctor's a little torqued today," Chris said, kneeling to scratch Klaus behind the ears, "but then he usually is."

"And you're not?" I asked.

"No," he said, then paused, as if surprised by his own answer. "To tell you the truth, I don't feel much of anything yet. Numb, I guess. I'll probably come unglued later, at the funeral or something. I've got a talent for social disaster. Do you really think somebody killed Pop? I mean really?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, "but I told your mom I'd look into it." I finished my drink and stood up. Klaus rose with me, wagging his tail expectantly. "It's funny about Klaus," I said, "it's been what, more than ten years. I wouldn't have thought a dog would remember that long."

"Maybe not so funny," Chris said blandly, "he was a stray too, you know. Pop had a thing about taking in strays."

For a moment I thought I glimpsed something not altogether friendly in Chris's eyes, and I wondered if it had always been there. But maybe it was just a trick of the light.

"Well," I said, "at least it worked out with Klaus."

"So it did," he agreed, "with Klaus."

I decided to leave my rental car and walk downtown to the park. It was a pleasant stroll, less than a mile, and Gus had made it morning, noon, and evening for most of his life. The afternoon was crisp and golden, pale November sun gleaming from a cloudless sky on neatly kept frosted lawns, clean streets, no trash or derelicts. The wind was brisk and bitter, stinging my cheeks and cutting through my overcoat. I'd been in warm countries too long, where the seasons were marked only by the rain.

The park follows a bend of the river through the heart of the business district for five or six blocks, an unfenced, greenbelt of trimmed shrubs, maple trees, and picnic tables. In the warmer months people bring lunches, watch the river flow, or feed the ducks. But in November its only visitors would be walking through it to somewhere else.

Finding the 'spot' wasn't difficult. The Algonquin River was sheeted over with a thin skin of snow-dusted ice that glistened in the sun like crushed diamonds. Except for one broken area near the bank at the center of the park. I stood there a moment, staring down into the dark pool, watching ice shards circle in the turbid water like bits of broken glass, a shattered window to the next world. I felt no sense of death, though,

or of Gus. It was just a hole in the ice. But it wasn't a bad place to commit suicide. Or whatever.

The river was near the street here; traffic sounds were audible, but it was shielded from view by a wall of neatly trimmed cedar shrubs. It didn't look particularly dangerous, but death could come quickly. The water was deep and swift, and the chill would bring on hypothermic shock in seconds.

The frozen ground told me nothing, but then I'm not a detective, I'm a narc, and we don't spend much time looking for clues. We usually just listen. Most dopers will dump on each other for a kind word or an empty promise, so finding out who's dealing what is often easy. The hard part is nailing them within the game's arbitrary rules. And staying immune from the gangrene.

I continued along the cobblestone path and came out of the park on Mack Avenue, the main corridor of the ten block business district. The streets were deserted, which struck me as odd until I noticed that most of the shops were vacant, windows dusty, papered over with signs that said MOVED TO GREENACRES MALL. The businesses remaining were professional—dentists, lawyers—and since it was Saturday, most of them were closed.



A thin plume of smoke was rising from the flue of the newsstand on the corner and I drifted toward it, my steps quickening as I recognized the figure behind the counter.

He had his back to me, straightening the stock of magazines at the rear of the kiosk. His rangy frame was clad in denim, his shaggy black hair held out of his eyes by a red bandanna. I rapped on the counter and he turned. Except for a small puckered scar on his temple, the hard hawkface hadn't changed at all.

"Hello, Cochise," I said.

He stared at me a moment, frowning.

"Do I know you?"

"Ronnie Dukarski," I said, offering my hand. "Hey man, it hasn't been that long, we . . ." I trailed off, confused. He was ignoring my outstretched hand. Because he couldn't see it. Or anything else. The pucker scar was only the junction point for a network of faint white lines, a map of pain. He looked the same. Because his face had been reassembled.

"We what?" he said, irritated.

"Where am I supposed to know you from?"

"High school," I said, swallowing, "the basketball team. I was a guard the year you—"

"I don't remember any of that," he snapped, "nothin' be-

fore I got my head blowed off in 'Nam. So let's don't play 'remember when,' okay? I'll lose. You want a paper or somethin'? I got a living to make here."

"Sure, I'll take an *Algonquin News*, but ah, I wonder if I could ask—"

"Look, I just told you—"

"About yesterday," I interrupted, "can we talk about yesterday?"

He scowled, mulling it over. "Why riot?" he said at last. "Big day yesterday. Scared the livin' crap outta me. Christ, if I'da had a foxhole shovel I woulda burrowed into the damn sidewalk."

"You mean when Gus LaBrequé drowned?" I asked. "I don't—"

"No, no, I mean the accident. An ol' drunk broad in a pickup wiped out about five parked cars right on Mack here, and then rear-ended some dude sittin' at the stop light. Sounded like the end of the goddamn world. Nobody hurt much, I guess. Musta been somethin' to see," he added sourly.

"Did this happen around the time Gus—"

"Look, I don't know much about time. My old lady drops me off at seven and picks me up at six and if she got 'em backwards I probably wouldn't know the difference, you know? Gus always stopped for his afternoon paper, only yesterday he

didn't 'cause he croaked. And that's all I can tell ya."

"Right," I said. "I appreciate it." I handed him a five, took my paper and walked away. He didn't offer me change and I didn't ask.

"Hey," he called after me, "what'd you say your name was?"

"Dukarski. Ronnie Duke."

He closed his eyes a moment, concentrating, the strain showing in his clenched jaws. He shook his head. "Were we supposed to be buddies, or something?"

"Not really," I said, "you were a hardass then, too. Can't say you've changed much."

"My old lady says the same thing," he said, a grin distorting his features like a melting rubber mask. "Look, I, ah, I think I mighta heard Gus yesterday. When it happened."

"What do you mean *heard* him?" I said, walking back to the newsstand.

"I think I heard him yell," he said, "right after the accident. A lot of people were yelling, but my ears are pretty good. I think it was Gus."

"What did he say?"

"'No, no, you bastard,' or 'you dumb bastard.' Something like that."

"That's it? Are you sure?"

"I think so, but he called me a dumb bastard once, so maybe I got that part mixed up. Some-

times I get things . . ." He shook his head.

"Why would he call you that?"

"Ahhh, I went through this phase where I wouldn't ask nobody what color the traffic lights were, you know? Just crossed when I felt like it, figured people better stop. Gus got in my face about it, said with my luck a busload a orphans'd probably get wiped out tryna miss me. Called me a dumb bastard and a lot worse."

"He had a hard mouth on him," I said, "he worked in that shop a long time."

"What the hell," Cochise shrugged, "he was right. At least he talked to me straight up. Most people act like I got cottage cheese for brains."

"Did you tell the police about this?"

"I told a cop yesterday afternoon after I heard about Gus. He didn't get too excited."

"I'll check into it," I said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," he said levelly, "he sounded scared. I didn't know him good, but I heard he was dyin' anyway, so whaddyâ figure it'd take to scare a guy like that?"

"I don't know," I said slowly, "but I've been gone a long time. I'll let you know if—"

"Yeah, yeah, stop by again," he said, cutting me off. "It's always a gas to see somebody from the old days."

I tried to assemble what Cochise had told me as I wandered through the business district. It wouldn't align. I'd known Gus LaBrique as well as I've ever known anyone. I'd seen him happy, angry, even drunk. But I'd never seen him scared. I'd seen him cry, though. In my room at Veteran's Hospital in Grand Rapids. The last time I saw him alive.

Gus made the two hour drive twice a week, to sit with me and talk. And, I thought at the time, to gloat just a little. To say "I told you so" with his presence alone. Because I shouldn't have been there.

I had a draft exemption as a Vital Defense Worker. We all had them because of the shop's navy contracts. Gus saw Vietnam coming early. He'd fought in World War II, lost a brother in France and another on Tarawa. His only nephew died in Korea, as had my father. And he said *enough*. The LaBriques and Dukarskis had paid enough. We'd fight for America, but not for the clown of the month in Saigon.

But, of course, I knew better. At twenty I knew a lot more about patriotism and honor than Gus did. So I volunteered, and became a Green Beret. And got shot to pieces by an ARVN sentry north of Quang Tri.

I watched Nixon's "peace with

honor" speech on TV from a military hospital bed on Guam.

And Gus and I watched the fall of Saigon together in my room in Grand Rapids, watched in silence as the sentries beat back the hands thrusting through the bars while the choppers lifted off from the roof of the American Embassy. I glanced at Gus, and he was crying, tears trickling unnoticed down his weathered cheeks, his eyes fixed on the TV screen. Crying for the waste, I thought, and the stupidity. And maybe a little for me.

I said something cynical, something appropriately macho for my role as betrayed hero, but he didn't respond. He got up and walked slowly from the room, without a word, without looking back. And later, when I carped about his lack of sensitivity to Helen, she told me that Harry, Gus's youngest, inspired by my sterling example, had enlisted in the Marines. And drowned in a Louisiana swamp during basic training the month before.

So I started running. I got myself transferred to a hospital in Pennsylvania, sent for Helen, who was foolish enough to marry me, and tried to cauterize my guilt with work, first at Penn State, then with the DEA, fighting the good fight to save America. From itself, as it turned out. I was in Belize

when Helen had Melissa, and in Juarez when our divorce became final. Uncontested. I'm great at causes, especially lost ones, not so good with people.

And now I was in front of City Hall, staring sightlessly at the building directory and wondering how long I'd been standing there. Terrific. At least I'd managed to find the right building. Spenser'd be impressed.

I climbed the concrete steps and pushed through the glass doors into the Algonquin police department, a large open office with a half-dozen battered metal desks behind a long, battleship gray counter. Not a soul in sight. Not even a bell to ring for a salesperson.

I wandered down the hall looking for a sign of life. A light was showing beneath a door with WILBUR F. KETCHEL, CHIEF OF POLICE stenciled on it in gold leaf. I rapped once and went in.

There was no one at the dark mahogany desk, but the door to the private bathroom was open and I could hear an electric razor whining accompaniment to "Proud Mary" sung in a cracked baritone. I helloed loudly. The song ended but the razor lingered on. I eased into one of the leather upholstered chairs facing the desk, and a moment later the singer appeared, buttoning his dark blue uniform shirt. He had ex-army written all over him, from his salt-and-

pepper brushcut to his spit-shined boots, square face, square shoulders, level brown eyes with scar tissue around the brows.

"Hi," I said, "my name's Dukarski, I'm—"

"I know who you are," he said brusquely, dropping into his swivel chair. "Melissa's got your picture on her nightstand. Next to mine. Is this business, or a social call?"

I glanced at his nametag. Captain Raymond Newell. My successor in Helen's life. Just terrific. We eyed each other warily across the desk, like two mongrel dogs meeting in strange territory. "It's business," I said at last. "I, ah, actually wanted to talk to the chief. The sign on the door—"

"He's out for the week," Newell said. "I'm afraid you're stuck with me. Any reason I can't help you?"

"No," I said. "I guess not. I want to ask about Gus La-Breque's death. Has the cause been officially determined yet?"

"The coroner's inquest won't be held until Monday morning, but the evidence is pretty straightforward. The man was dying of cancer, his hat and coat were found on the riverbank. The finding will probably be death by drowning, self-inflicted."

"Any eyewitnesses? Anyone see him go in?"

"No, but that's not surprising. The park's usually deserted this time of year."

"I talked to a guy who says he heard Gus cry out."

He stared at me a moment before replying. "This isn't a DEA case, Dukarski," he said evenly. "You have no official standing here, no right to question anybody."

"Gus was . . . family to me, so if I don't worry too much about jurisdiction, I hope you'll understand."

"I may sympathize, but that's all. This is official police business. I presume your 'earwitness' is Cochise Cole. I saw a report about it. Quite a character, Cochisé. Not much of a witness."

"Maybe not, but there's a little more."

And I told him about Gus's pills.

"Pretty thin," he sniffed, "but okay, just for the sake of argument, let's say it wasn't suicide, and his hat and coat were left on the bank to make it look like one. You got any candidates?"

"No, I've been gone too long. That'll have to be your department."

"Most perps are related or known to the victim," he shrugged. "I'd say his wife is physically incapable of it. How about his boys?"

"They had a motive," I said

reluctantly. "He was considering a business move that could have cost them a lot of money, and they were aware of it."

"Either of them capable of it, you think?"

"No," I said positively. "If I thought that I'd probably walk into that river myself. Who else?"

"There might be one . . . no," he said abruptly, "I don't think I can go into that. It's privileged information, technically, and—"

"Come on, Newell, I'm not a civilian. Nothing will go beyond this room."

"It's not that, it's . . . ahh, hell, you and me haven't got much cause to like each other up front, you know? And you're gonna like this even less, but try to see it from my point—"

"Look, in my business bad news is the only kind there is, why don't you just spit it out."

"Fine," Newell snapped, "have you seen the new shopping center going up west of town, Green Acres?"

"We flew over it on the way in," I nodded.

"Robert Connors and Associates are the contractors for it, multimillion dollar project, a lot of local jobs."

"So?"

"Does the name Bobby Komszak mean anything to you?"

"I was in school with a kid named Komszak. Tough kid, from the north side."

"He's still a tough kid, only now he calls himself Robert Connors. He started out as a mule for the DelaGarza family down in Saginaw, graduated to dealing and muscle, and now he's running this front company for them, partly legitimate, doing construction jobs all over the state. His trucks move supplies and equipment around. And we're also sure they move cocaine and high grade weed."

"So why haven't you shut him down?"

"Yeah, well, back in August we gave it a shot, raided his offices, stopped and searched his trucks. Hell, we even tore apart a couple of his building sites. Zip. All we got were four civil suits for harassment, and a cease and desist order from the federal bench. He's home free for now. We can't touch him."

"I don't see what this—"

"Your buddy Chris LaBrequé is a recreational drug user," Newell said bluntly, "coke mostly. Gus found out about it a month or so ago. He jumped all over Chris about it, then he came down here and tore into us, wanted to know why the stuff was available."

"My God." I stood up carefully, and walked to the narrow window, using every ounce of willpower I had to keep from going over the desk after New-

ell. "And naturally you told him. Didn't you."

"Look, we need to counteract some of the community support Connors has built—"

"Bullshit! You knew what Gus was like, how he'd react. You can't touch Komszak, so you used Gus to shake his tree. And Gus went after him, didn't he."

"He went to see him, yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. They talked, but Gus wouldn't wear a wire or even tell us what was said. We kept him under surveillance the whole time and for a couple of weeks after. Gus finally made me call it off. Said he was in no danger."

"And now he's dead."

"But it wasn't murder," Newell said flatly. "Dammit, it *was* suicide. We covered every inch of that riverbank. Even with the ground frozen there should have been some sign of a struggle. There wasn't. His hat and coat were on the bank; there was no abnormal bruising on the body, nothing at all to indicate foul play."

"Except that he cried out."

"No, *maybe* he cried out," Newell countered, "Cochise admits he can't be positive. A lot of people were shouting."

"Right," I said, "because of the accident. A drunk trashing a half-dozen parked cars at roughly the same time Gus de-

cides to end it all. Helluva coincidence, wasn't it?"

"Maybe so, but that's all it was. The driver's a chronic boozier. She registered a 2.21 on the breathalyzer, for chrissake, she was damn near in an alcoholic coma. Claimed she was on her way to the detox center at County General and swerved to avoid a bear. Does she sound like somebody Komszak'd hire as a decoy to cover a murder?"

"I don't know," I said, "and since you've bungled yourselves into a corner I guess I'll have to ask him myself. But by God if Gus got killed because you conned him into—"

"I didn't con him into anything!" Newell flared. "He asked me and I told him."

"So whatever happened is his fault, right? You son of a bitch!" We faced each other across the mahogany desk, only a word away from an explosion. And I wanted it. God, I needed to hit *something*. On impulse I picked up the carved nameplate from the desk, slammed it against the edge of the desk, snapping it in half, and tossed the pieces to Newell.

"Great," he said, "real mature, Dukarski. That was an anniversary gift from his wife. What—"

"Just tell him his goddamn sign committed suicide," I said, cutting him off. "Maybe he'll go for it."

The taxi dropped me in front of an ultra-modern office complex across the parking lot from the new shopping mall, a sprawling split-level building with steeply angled multiple roofs and huge acrylic portholes for windows. It looked like a Martian colony rendered in redwood.

The tinted glass door marked "ROBERT CONNORS AND ASSOC." shushed open at my approach, welcoming me to a skylit lobby done in pearl gray carpet with walls of smoked glass that disappeared into the distance like an infinity of mirrors. The receptionist's gray blazer and earrings color-coordinated with the decor, but the rest of her didn't. She had a square Slavic face, wide shoulders, and ham-sized hands with blunt fingertips. I dismissed any notions of strongarming my way in. She could probably take me two falls out of three without mussing her eyeshadow. Her smile caught me by surprise, the sun rising on a winter morning.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm here to see Mr. Connors."

"I'm afraid he's in conference. Are you with the group from the Chamber of Commerce?"

"No, I'm from Detroit. Tell Bobby there's been . . . a death in the family, and he'd better see me. Now. It won't take long."



Her eyes searched my face, and apparently read enough truth in it to satisfy her instincts. She tapped a button on her intercom, turning away from me as she murmured into the handset.

"This way, please."

I followed her down a narrow corridor to a carpeted stairway at the rear of the building. As we neared the top, she slipped, stumbling against me, nearly tumbling both of us back down.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, clinging to me a moment for support, "clumsy of me." But her eyes couldn't conceal a gleam of satisfaction. I'd just been frisked. Expertly.

She showed me into an elaborate private office done in dark pine, assured me that Mr. Connors would be along, and left me bemused, wondering what would have happened if I'd been wearing a gun. And if she ever took walks in the park.

The glass wall opposite the desk offered a broad view of the mall, but I barely had time for a glance before the door opened softly behind me and Robert Komszak/Connors walked in.

I'd never have recognized him if we'd passed on the street. The Bobby Komszak I'd known was a blocky, wild-haired leather jacket punk with a mad on for the world. The hair had been carefully styled, the body encased in an immaculately tai-

lored three-piece suit casually worn, with the necktie loosened. Only the eyes were the same, gray as ice and calculating as a stalking cat's. We sized each other up a moment; then he shrugged and walked to the desk.

"Mona said you wanted to see me about a death in the family?"

"My family," I said, "not yours."

He didn't seem surprised. "I know you," he said, "but I can't place the name."

"Dukarski. Algonquin High, class of '71."

"Right," he nodded, "I remember now. Ronnie Duke. Care for a cigar?" He took a narrow aluminum tube from a brass humidor and peeled off the end. "Can't smoke in the conference room, one of the guys is asthmatic," he explained, lighting up. "Which means you've got until I finish this to speak your piece, and maybe not that long. You're some kind of a Fed now, right?"

"Drug Enforcement Administration," I said, "based in Detroit."

He smiled at that, shaking his head. "And the local Keystone Kops've told you we're in the same business, I suppose, only on opposite sides of the street?"

"They mentioned it," I said, "but that's not why I'm here. I

came to talk about Gus LaBrequé."

"Jesus, that's right, you used to live with them, didn't you? It's a shame about Gus. He was quite a character."

"Was he? I understand you two had . . . words, a while back."

"I talk to a lot of people, so—" He broke off, frowning, his colorless eyes probing mine. "You don't think Gus committed suicide, do you," he said at last. "That's why you're here?"

"Do you think he did?"

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully, "I really only talked to him the one time. Or listened, rather. Gus did most of the talking."

"About what?"

"Bootleggers," Komszak grinned, "Gus told me about bootleggers. Did you know some of the biggest corporations in America were founded on money from illegal booze? Some real respectable families, too. And he said that during the Depression, his dad kept LaBrequé Maritime from going under by fitting out rumrunners for the Chicago mobs. He called it Social Darwinism. Interesting guy."

"That's all you talked about? Bootleggers?"

"Almost. As he was leavin' I believe he mentioned he was having some trouble with his boy Chris. Asked if I

could . . . use my influence to help out."

"And did you?"

"Yeah. I did. He knew how to ask."

"Funny. Gus wasn't exactly noted for his tact," I said.

"I wouldn't know. I only met him the once and he was straight enough with me. Look, I'm sorry he's dead. I'll send flowers. Anything else?"

"Just one more question. Do you know of anyone who could have put him in the river?"

Komszak frowned, carefully examining the glowing tip of his cigar. "Tell you the truth, if I did, I think I'd handle it myself. I liked the old guy. But I don't figure it went down that way. What makes you think he was aced?"

"He cried out," I said.

"Yeah? So what'd he say?"

"'No, no.' 'You bastard,' or 'you dumb bastard.' Something like that."

"Oh," he said, obviously disappointed. "I wouldn't've figured him for a guy who'd holler, but I guess you never know. 'No, you dumb bastard' don't exactly qualify for Famous Last Words, does it? Too bad he didn't holler somethin' about Social Darwinism."

"A real shame," I said.

"Afraid your cigar's up," he said, grinding it out in a carved crystal ashtray, "I gotta get back. Tell you what though,

Dukarski, if you think of any way I can help out about Gus, ask. If I can do it, I will, no strings attached."

"No thanks," I said. "If I see you again it'll probably be on business. Agency business."

"Whatever," he nodded, "but you better remember to pack a lunch. You're gonna have a long day. I'll see you around, Dukarski."

"Hey, Bobby," I called softly. He paused in the doorway, adjusting his tie. "Not all of the bootleggers got rich, you know. Most of them wound up in jail. Or dead."

"We all end up dead," he said evenly, "so you might as well take your best shot. Now me, I'm on my way to a meeting in my own building with some of the biggest movers in this town. Where are you headed, Dukarski?"

I didn't reply, which was an answer of sorts.

"Right," he nodded. "You have a good day now, hear?"

**A**nd so I went home, which is where you go when there's no place else, and I walked, because I was in no hurry to get there. I hoped the walk would clarify my thinking, but it didn't. It only froze my tail. The temperature followed the sun down to wherever it goes and snow began falling, plump cotton flakes

drifting lazily into the glow of the street lamps.

The windows of the La-Breque house were agleam, casting pools of golden light onto the snow-covered lawn. Home for Christmas. I glimpsed Alan through the living room window, moving through the crowd, a larger group than when I'd left. I trudged glumly around to the back door.

Klara and Chris glanced up as I let myself quietly into the kitchen. They were seated at the table, an open bottle of Courvoisier between them. Klaus rose from beside Klara's knee and sauntered over to sniff my pantleg, his tail sweeping a slow hello.

"Take a pew," Chris said, pushing a chair toward me with his foot. "Christ, you look like Nanook of the North."

I hung my sodden overcoat on a peg by the door and eased stiffly into the chair, gratefully accepting the tumbler of brandy Chris handed me. I tossed half of it down with one gulp. It exploded in my empty stomach like velvet napalm, making my eyes water.

"So, Ronalt," Klara said softly, "how did it go?"

I forced myself to meet her gaze. "Not well," I said. "I believe you are right, though. Gus did not take his own life. But so far, that's all I've managed to learn."

"But what the hell—?" Chris blurted.

"Be silent, Christof," Klara said, cutting him off. "You talked to the police, Ronalt?"

"To Captain Newell, yes, and several other people. No one could tell me why it . . . happened. Apparently Gus had no real enemies."

"And these people, you are satisfied they told you the truth?"

I mulled the afternoon over before I answered, images, fragments of conversation. "Yes," I said, "I think so. Funny, I'm used to lies. In my business everybody lies. Even me. But not today. I don't think anybody lied to me today." I finished my drink and pushed the glass to Chris for a refill.

"It is enough," she said. "If you learn no more it is enough that I know Gus—" She frowned and shook her head. "You've done well, Ronalt," she said after a moment. "You can do more?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, trying to muster some conviction. "I've barely started."

"Gut," she nodded, getting to her feet. "You will sleep here, Ronalt, your old room. There is food if you're hungry. I should see to our . . . guests now." She shuffled to the door with Klaus at her heels. I rose and opened it for her, and as she brushed past it dawned on me that she

was a very small woman, really, and she was nearly eighty years old. I wanted to reach out, to offer comfort, but somehow I couldn't, and then she was gone.

"Ronnie, what the hell is this?" Chris said angrily as I resumed my chair and brandy. "You're serious? You really think somebody killed the old man?"

"It looks like it," I said.

"Well, what are we doing sitting here then? Shouldn't we—?"

"Chris, I've done as much as I can for today. Maybe as much as I can, period. I've got no handle on this, no suspects, no motive. Dammit, it just doesn't make sense."

"But there must be something you can do! I mean, you've been in all those other countries, you're a pro. A little dump like Algonquin should be kid stuff for you."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you," I mused. "It should be easy. Hell, everybody's cooperative, even the crooks, nobody lies, it—" I paused with my glass in mid-air as the thought registered. Nobody had lied to me. Suppose no one had lied at all. To anybody.

I carried my drink to the counter, picked up the phone book, and riffled through the yellow pages. If nobody'd lied, then there was another way it could've gone down. And maybe, just maybe, Gus hadn't died in

that river for nothing. Or perhaps Alan was right and I was simply refusing to accept the ultimate rejection.

I found the number and tapped it out on the wall phone above the counter. And got a recording. "Sorry, we're closed," and it listed their regular office hours. But somebody would be there. They'd have to be.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Chris said, lurching to his feet.

I winced as I slipped into my sodden overcoat. "Probably on a wild goose chase," I said.

"Not without me, you're not," he said, "you might need help."

"It's not anything like—oh hell, get your coat. Maybe the drive'll sober you up."

**"I** don't know what you think you're gonna accomplish," Chris said, hunching his shoulders against the cold. "The sign in the window says the place is closed."

"The people who run it live in the back," I said, pounding on the door. "I was here with Gus once, a long time—"

The door opened a crack. A heavysset blob of a woman, her reddish hair in curlers, face smeared with vanishing cream, peered out at us. "We're closed," she snapped, clutching her flowered bathrobe at her throat, "you'll hafta come back—"

"Police," I said, flashing my DEA bronze and shouldering past her into the narrow hallway. "Did you make a pickup yesterday anywhere near the park?"

"I don't know," she said, "I don't work on the truck, I—hey, wait a minute, don't go in there!"

I stepped through the door into the back room and switched on the lights. The wall of noise struck me like a physical blow as fifty canine voices sounded at once, yapping, howling.

"Now see what you done," she wailed. "Dang it, it'll take half the night to settle 'em down again."

"We're looking for a big dog," I said, walking slowly along the triple-tiered row of wire cages, glancing in at each animal.

"Probably a black one that looks something like . . ." I stopped at the last cage on the row, a double wide. The brute inside raised his dark head from the bed of woodshavings, regarded me groggily, then lay back down. His right foreleg was encased in a plaster cast. "... Looks something like a bear," I finished quietly, kneeling down in front of the cage. "Where did you get this dog? How long has he been here?"

"I told you I don't know where, exactly," the woman said. "I think the guys on the truck said he was runnin' around downtown with his leg broke yester-

day afternoon. We had a helluva time sedatin' him so the vet could set it. I—"

"Was he wet when they brought him in?" I asked.

"Wet?" she echoed, her porcine eyes narrowing suspiciously, "yeah, he was. Soaked to the skin."

"I don't understand," Chris said.

"What's the big deal about the dog?"

"He was hit by a drunk driver on Mack yesterday," I said, "but since he was only the first of many things she clobbered, nobody noticed him but the drunk, and she was so bombed she mistook him for a bear. He ran through the park past your dad and into the river. The ice looks solid enough. To a dog. Gus yelled at him, called him a dumb bastard, but he was probably cursing himself as much as the dog. Because then he shucked his hat and coat and went in after it."

"What are you saying? That my dad died trying to save a damn dog?"

"Not trying to," I said, "he did save him. He must have pushed it to the bank, but he wasn't

strong enough to make it out himself."

"But it's so stupid," Chris said, shaking his head in disbelief, "so stupid."

"Maybe," I said, "but stupid or not, Gus couldn't stand there and watch the dog drown. He just couldn't. And I don't think you could have, either."

"I don't know," Chris choked, "I ah—" He turned abruptly, brushing past the woman as he stalked out of the room.

She glared after him for a moment, then back at me. "Look, mister, I don't know what's goin' on here, but is this your dog or what?"

"Yes," I said, "I suppose it is."

"Well, then, you'll hafta come back to claim it during regular office hours. And there'll be some fees, you know, for fixin' him up and all."

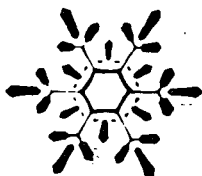
"I'll take care of any charges," I said, "you just be sure you take good care of him. This is a very expensive dog."

"Hmph," the woman snorted, "looks like just another stray to me."

"I know," I said softly, "but you see, some people have a thing about strays."



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# UNSOLVED

by Hubert  
Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

"It was no mean dinner we had last Saturday," said Edward. "There were just the five of us: Albert, Brian, Charlie, Donald, and me. We mixed our drinks a little too freely, and what do you think the result was? Each of us went away with the hat belonging to one of the others; gloves belonging to another of them; an umbrella belonging to a third. It's taken us several days to sort them out.

"For example, the bloke who had my umbrella was under the impression that he also had Donald's hat. Then, after a lot of telephoning, he found that he was wrong about that."

Amused by this contretemps, I collected a few more clues. Brian took the hat of the diner who carried off Charlie's gloves. The owner of the gloves which Charlie took went off with Donald's umbrella. Donald himself took the umbrella whose owner's hat was worn by Albert. And the diner who took Brian's umbrella also took Albert's hat.

*Who went home with Albert's umbrella?*

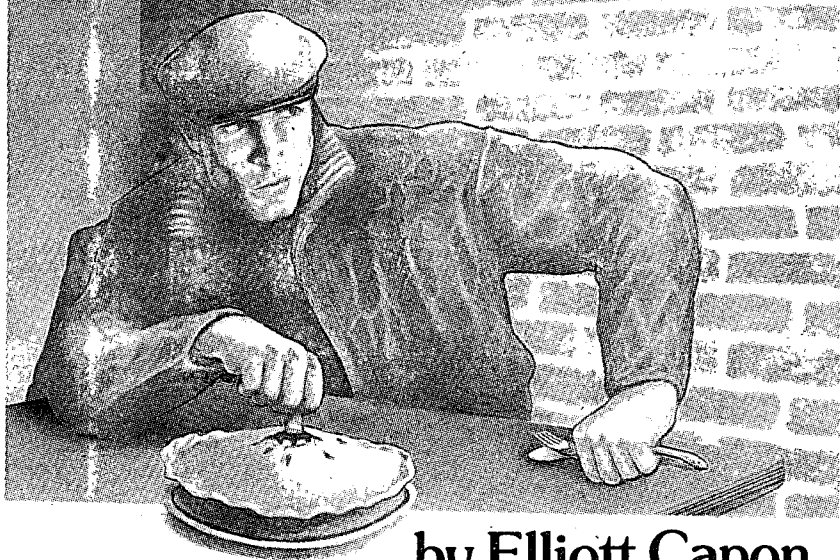
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See page 149 for the solution to the December puzzle.

"Albert's Umbrella," taken from My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

FICTION

# Little Jack Horner



by Elliott Capon

## *Little Jack Horner*

At five ten, Jack Horner was not particularly small, but the first gang he ran with had a preponderance of six-footers, and the name Little Jack, given in an offhanded moment, stuck with him throughout his life. He did some time in a juvenile center for helping boost a car, his only pre-adult bust in a checkered career involving auto theft, receipt and transport of stolen property, and

*Illustration by Joe Jereda*

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seeing to it that other property got itself stolen. Shortly after his nineteenth birthday, Jack and several other stalwarts were nabbed while trying to ease the burden of a warehouse inventory controller. Thanks to a judge's decision that the arresting officers had to read each suspect his Miranda rights personally, and couldn't issue a blanket speech (even though they had all mumbled their understanding), Jack, albeit crimson-handed, walked. At that point he decided that running with the pack increased the chances of a screw-up exponentially for each person involved. So he became a loner, B&E'ing where *he* wanted to, taking what *he* thought was worth it, fencing it with guys *he* knew and trusted. As the years went by and Jack got older and wiser, he became more selective in his chosen field of endeavor. He gradually went after fewer, higher-ticket items, easier to fence. Boosting a Porsche was easy, but moving one hard. Ripping off a new Caddy was just as easy, much simpler to get rid of. A hundred pounds of silverware in a sack made for great bragging, and awe when uncovered before his peers, but a diamond ring made for less of a bulge in the coat pocket.

As Jack got older too, his attitude changed: he was no longer stealing for the sake of stealing, but stealing to make a living. Jack would never make a bid on the Rockefeller estate, but he had a decent apartment in a decent neighborhood. When the rent was due, or the credit card approached the limit, Jack would visit someone a little better off than he, or a prosperous business, and help himself to some commodities. All told, Jack had a fairly comfortable life.

Not perfect, though. Jack had taken two falls since achieving legal adulthood. He had done six months for possession of stolen goods when he was twenty-four, and two and a half years for B&E, burglary, possession of burglar's tools (they plea-bargained away the possession of stolen goods, possession of a concealed weapon, and resisting arrest; if the weapon hadn't remained concealed, and his resistance had involved more than trying to get out through the window he had entered, he'd have been put away for decades) when he was thirty-one. Jack had been lucky for the last eight years, going to work when necessary and being questioned a couple of times but never charged. One more fall, of course, and he was Ken-L-Ration; fortunately, he was good, he was careful, he wasn't greedy. Too, he was lucky.

He was lucky, too, in Mary.

Mary McGraw and Jack had met when she came to visit her brother, a longtimer who shared Jack's cell during the longer of his two stretches. She was three years younger than Jack, no beauty (as Jack was no Adonis), but they had a certain something in common. It was in their eyes. Anyone perceptive enough could look into either one's eyes and see that no silver spoon had ever been reflected there. You would see a little movie in those eyes, a movie where life had tried to press its boot on the back of their necks and grind their faces into the mud, and where both of them had stood up and shaken off the pressure, to stand. To stand bent, perhaps, but to stand.

Mary's brother had ended up in jail, and Mary herself had almost ended up in the streets. She was hooked on heroin by the time she was sixteen but at eighteen had cold-turkeyed herself straight. She had fallen into the bottle a few times, had spent too many nights in beds not her own, had offered herself once too often as a punching bag for some lowlife. But each time, she pulled herself up. Each time, she dried herself out, spiritually regained her virginity, packed her bags, and took a hike. When she met Jack, she was working as a waitress in a nice restaurant—not a great one, a nice one. She'd hit the sauce maybe once a month or so, but would force herself to go to work the next day. She felt she was a human being again.

Jack saw all that in her eyes, and she saw his version in his eyes, and they fell in love. Upon his release, they promptly moved in together in his decent apartment. They hadn't been together long enough to be common-law married, and the question of standing before a backwards collar had never arisen, but they did all right. There was one source of contention and one only: now that Mary had capped the bottle for good and was bringing home very good money from a new job at a very fancy place with outrageous tips, she wanted Jack to quit his occasional forays.

"We don't need you to take the risk for a score," she said.

"You ain't gonna support me," he answered, "and I don't know no other kind of work."

The first time, the argument consisted of just those two lines. The next time, it was longer, the time after that, longer and louder. And more frequent.

*Sat in the corner*

December 16th. With Christmas less than two weeks away, Jack

still hadn't gotten Mary anything. He realized that the one bone of contention was creating lots of little tensions, lots of fault-finding and bickering, and he knew that one day one wrong word would lead to another and another and that would be the end. Where Jack came from, when your girl got mad you gave her candy or flowers and she melted in your arms. Jack wanted to give Mary something special: a mink, a diamond necklace, something that had three words in the price, the second two being "thousand" and "dollars."

But nothing hot in and of itself.

On this December 16th, Jack sat at the corner stool in Henn ssy's B r & rill and looked through the window at the Major Manufacturing Company building across the street. He had sat there all of last Tuesday, too, and watched as the armored car brought the payroll for three hundred employees, cash. He watched this Tuesday as the armored car also brought the payroll cash. Two Tuesdays in a row he sat at Henn ssy's all day and poured drinks down the throat of Leo Skolnick, the assistant bookkeeper, and found out that on Tuesday the 23rd the payroll would be supplemented by two- to four-weeks' salary bonuses for all the employees, to be given out at the Christmas party that started when work shut down at noon on Christmas Eve. About seventy-five thousand dollars, give or take. The forty bucks it cost him for Leo's liquor was a small investment indeed.

Lots of fancy, expensive places would be open for business on Christmas Eve day.

### *Eating his Christmas pie.*

Jack half-lay across the bed, studying the drawings he had made, the photos he had taken, the designs he had copied by plunking down a few bucks at the Department of Buildings. Haste made waste.

Mary walked into the bedroom. "What're you doing?"

"Nothin'," he grunted. "Just lemme alone fra few minutes."

Mary walked over, saw the papers. "You're plannin' another heist, ain't ya?" she asked. "Dammit, Jack, I told you no more! I don't want no more of this life!"

Jack suddenly forgot why he was shopping for cash. "You don't want no more of this life take a damn hike!" he shouted. "I been feedin' and clothin' ya for six years, an' if you're tired of it, then just get the hell out!"



"I ain't leavin'!" Mary yelled back. "It's *my* paycheck been payin' the rent on this dump."

The yelling and shouting soon escalated into a full scale knock-down-drag-out, a frequent circumstance in Jack's decent apartment. And, as always, it ended much later in a lovemaking session. Not completely true: it ended in sex. This time Jack did not see the movie in Mary's eyes. The movie was over. The projector was shut down. The seats were empty. Jack was ignoring her wishes. Jack was betraying her. Jack was killing their relationship by his stubbornness.

Mary did not love Jack any more.

### *He stuck in his thumb*

Aside from the bar and a couple of sandwich stores, the area was light industrial and, it being the Christmas season, there were no midnight shifts. At two thirty in the morning, December 24th, the area was pitch black, absolutely deserted. It was cold, bitter cold; even the stray dogs were huddled up somewhere. Old rundown factories and printshops need no night watchmen. Jack was the only living creature within a square quarter-mile.

The cops had confiscated his tools at the last bust, but a man of Jack's experience always knew where to get a new set. And new they were: picks, files, and assorted tools of the trade that practically glowed in the dim light of the far street lamps. Getting to the Major Manufacturing Company building was a breeze. Finding the accounting office was a snap. A glass-paneled door; no need to be quiet or waste time, so he just rapped a gloved hand against the glass and stepped back as it shattered. Reach in, snap the lock, presto, he was in. The safe was one of those three-drawer, locked filing cabinets. Impregnable to a janitor or vice-president looking to dip into the petty cash, but child's play to an experienced operator like Jack.

### *And pulled out a plum*

He found a canvas bag with the name of the armored truck company imprinted on it. He snorted his derision, and felt cocky enough to switch on a desk lamp and count the cash. Seventy-six thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars. He felt like a kid again as he packed up and left the office, leaving behind him in his elation only a small little pair of custom-made, hand-tooled, long nose pliers.

Mary put on the chinchilla coat like it was skunk, and hung the collection of baseball-sized diamonds around her neck like they were a string of garlic, while Jack crowed Noel felicitations at her. As soon as he left the apartment she threw the items into the closet, slamming the door on them.

*And said, "What a good boy am I."*

The cops came for him January sixth, charged him with all kinds of feloniousnesses. Things being dull down at the courthouse, they tried him almost immediately.

Jack's lawyer was a very good one, thanks to whom two dozen or more felons freely walked the streets. Jack pleaded innocent. His lawyer was very, very good. He made a monkey out of the burglary detective. He made a fool out of the lab technician. He made a dunce out of the metallurgist. In two days he shot down everyone but the Red Baron.

Jack sat in the courtroom oh so smug as his mouthpiece fought him foot by foot, inch by inch, closer to freedom. A third fall would be bad, real bad. Even if this guy would take whatever was left of the score as his fee, it was better than breathing air filtered through bars. Oh so smug.

Jack's lawyer got up. "Your Honor," he said, "I believe the district attorney's office has not made any case whatsoever against my client. I believe this trial to be a waste of Your Honor's time, the jury's time, the district attorney's time, and the taxpayer's money, and I therefore move for dismissal."

The judge turned to the assistant D.A. "Mr. Prosecutor?" she asked.

The A.D.A. untied his tongue and uncrossed his eyes. "If it please the court," he said, "the people have one more witness."

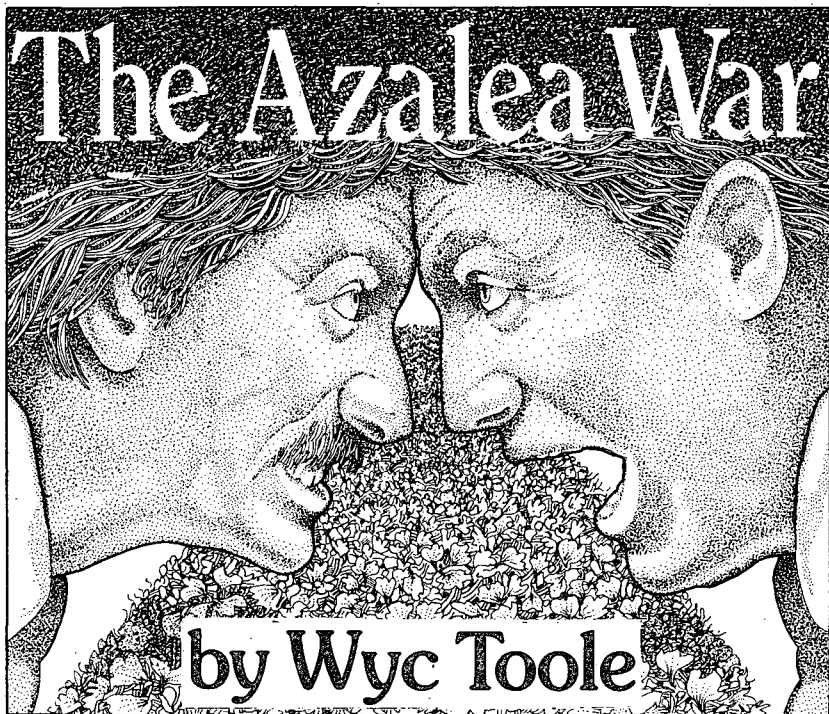
One more witness? Jack actually sat back in the chair and smiled, winking at his lawyer.

"The people," said the prosecutor, "call Mary McGraw."

Stunned, Jack bolted straight up and watched Mary as she walked down the aisle toward the witness stand. He looked into her eyes, and she looked into his.

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary . . .*





**E**verybody says it happened because of the dog and the azalea bushes, but I can tell you there was a lot more to it than that. The dog and the azaleas just brought everything into focus and it's scary to think you could get killed that way.

I keep reading and hearing about how all people got to do to solve their problems is to sit down and talk—you know, so they understand each other. Well, I'm not too sure I agree with that any more. It sounds good, but after living out here

in a quiet neighborhood where people talk all the time, have nice homes and plenty to eat and still see 'em kill each other, I don't know. Maybe people ain't all that reasonable when something they value—no matter what it is—gets threatened. Maybe talking then just makes it worse. But I'm getting ahead of myself as usual.

What happened was that Charlie Wilson and his wife Mary moved in about two years after Margie—that's my wife—and me. Charlie had a tool and die business some-

where up around the Detroit area before he retired and bought the lot next to mine. He and Mary built a big brick home, ran a cedar fishing dock out into the lake, and seemed to be as satisfied as anybody else I knew.

Not too many people lived out here then and Margie and me saw a lot of the Wilsons. No big friendship, just dinner and bridge a couple of times a week and Charlie and me fished together sometimes. We had a few things in common because I owned a hardware store over in Gainesville for thirty years.

I originally bought my place out here on the lake for the weekends and summers. Kids loved it. Lots of old shady oaks and pines. A big, clear, white sand bottomed lake so clean you could drink out of it. Can't do that any more. Too many people using it now:

After the kids got married and left home, I had a little run-in with heart trouble. I sold the store and our house in town, expanded the cottage, and Margie and me came out to stay. We were almost the first permanent residents on the lake, so it was good to have the Wilsons for company. You probably notice I said "company," not "friends," because Charlie could be pretty hard to get along with sometimes. It was just his nature, I guess. Even looked

hard—a big, long, lanky man with heavy bones, a thick head of white hair, and a quick temper. Walked like a caged lion. Never gained a pound, either—no matter what he ate, which was discouraging for somebody like me. I've always been too heavy. But the strongest thing I remember about Charlie was his eyes. They were a cold, pale blue and always seemed to be looking at something far away. Charlie never talked much, either, and when I was around him I usually got the feeling he'd much rather be by himself.

Now Mary, she more than made up for Charlie's lack of conversation. She's a plump little girl with curly white hair that used to be blonde, blue eyes, a pert nose, and straight white teeth. Said she never had a cavity in her life. Probably because her mouth moved so much no germs could get a toe-hold. That woman could really talk! I never saw her when she was quiet. She rattled on at speeds of about three hundred words a minute with gusts up to three fifty. Still, I liked Mary. She was a good person. Do anything in the world for you.

Charlie and Mary were sort of a separate couple, if you know what I mean. Seemed happy enough, but not much show of affection, didn't have any common interests, and no

children. Margie said Mary talked so much because she had been lonely most of her life.

About a year after the Wilsons came, Dave and Sue Patterson moved in. Dave had a chain of shoestores in Ohio before he sold out and came down. They bought the lot next to the Wilsons' and built a stone and cedar home that was really pretty.

The dog I was talking about earlier belonged to Dave. Said he'd had him since he was a puppy. The dog's name was Bear and he was seven or eight years old then. Dave and Bear were real close. If you could hit one with a rock, you could hit the other one. I considered this a blessing because Bear was a *huge* German shepherd with the biggest teeth I ever saw on a dog.

The first thing Dave did after he moved in was to take Bear around to meet all the neighbors. I told Margie I figured it was Dave's way of telling Bear who he couldn't eat. Dave claimed the dog was real gentle when he knew you, but I was never comfortable around him. With a dog that big you never know.

After Dave and Sue came, Margie and me sort of drifted away from the Wilsons. Six people don't make for good bridge games. Charlie and Dave weren't all that close, but Mary

and Sue hit it off like sisters from the first day they met. Looked a lot like sisters, too. Sue was another little blonde with a big bosom and blue eyes and she talked as much as Mary did. It was absolutely amazing to watch them talk at each other. I never did understand how they could keep anything straight with both of them talking at the same time, but they did and seemed to enjoy it.

I thought at first that Margie might feel left out with Sue and Mary always being together, but she said not. Said she enjoyed them both, but that it was a lot better the way it was. They needed that kind of constant companionship and she just didn't have time for it.

I understood because Margie and me always been as much friends as husband and wife. Her mother used to say we were like a pair of Irish peat diggers—just give us a place to sit and plenty to eat and drink and we didn't need anyone or anything else to be perfectly happy. It sure wasn't that way for Sue and Mary, though. Neither Charlie nor Dave were much on talking and going places. Funny how different they were in some ways and how alike in others. Even told me they both used to hunt a lot, years back. Seemed proud they took their wives on hunting trips and taught them to shoot. I found it hard to be-

lieve Mary and Sue thought this was a fun thing to do. I just never could picture them skinning deer and drinking blood and the other things Dave and Charlie laughed about teaching them. Now, however, Dave and Charlie just fished and worked in their yards and I never got the feeling their wives were all that important to them.

I don't mean they were ugly to the girls or anything like that. They were just loners—two hardheaded, independent men who were having real trouble adjusting to a life without a business to run. Listening to them when they did talk, you soon understood their work had been their lives and that kind of living must have been damn hard on Mary and Sue.

Like not having children. Margie told me they both said their husbands had wanted to wait on having kids until their businesses were solid enough to afford them without stretching either their time or money. So they waited and waited and when they finally had the money, time had run out and it was too late to do anything about it. Sad, too. Mary and Sue loved children. They would have been good mothers.

Anyway, getting back to the trouble, Dave had his dog and Charlie had his azaleas. Tons of them. All over his yard in a million colors. His real treas-

ure, however, was a thick hedge of big Formosa azaleas running along the property line between his house and Dave's. Charlie had planted those bushes right after he moved in, and he was truly proud of them. Perfectly beautiful in the spring. Margie said the color of the flowers was a pale salmon. I don't know much about colors, but I sure did enjoy seeing them in full bloom.

Naturally, Dave's dog thought the best place in the whole world to sleep was in the shade of that big azalea hedge and, as most dogs will, dug holes beside it to lie in. Sometimes Charlie would get all bent outta shape about this, saying Bear was gonna kill his plants. Dave always told him the dog was in his own yard and could damn well dig holes in it if he wanted to. There wasn't much Charlie could do about it other than complain to me. We both knew Dave wasn't going to pay any attention to him. That's how Dave was.

When the real trouble started, though, Bear had gotten older like the rest of us. I guess he was twelve or thirteen by then—half blind, couldn't hear too well, and cranky like some people I know. He didn't run around much, just lay in the yard or on the dock where he could keep an eye on Dave—which is how it happened.

You can hear a lot of different stories now about that day, but I know exactly what went on. I was right there cutting my front lawn. It was in late April. The weather was warm and dry. Charlie was out trimming his azaleas, Dave was weeding the boxwoods along the walk, and Bear was sleeping in the shade of the azalea hedge. Charlie told me later he stepped through the hedge onto Dave's property to get a better angle on a stray branch. He didn't know Bear was there and the back edge of his heel landed on the dog's tail. Bear must have thought he was being attacked because he jumped up, yelped like he'd been gut shot, and bit Charlie.

Fortunately old Bear wasn't as strong as he once was and his teeth only went through Charlie's jeans and about an inch into his leg. Six years earlier Bear would have probably taken off Charlie's foot. Charlie apparently thought he had because he lets out a scream that's louder than Bear's and I stopped my mower to see who was getting killed. What I saw was Charlie dancing around on one foot with blood all over the other one and Bear looking sleepy and confused and licking his tail.

Dave came running over and if he had said something sympathetic it might have ended

right then, but Charlie looked so damn silly jumping around on one foot that Dave started laughing. I admit I chuckled some myself.

This didn't go over too well with Charlie. He didn't think it was a bit funny, and Dave's laughing made him madder than he already was. So, cussing Dave, Bear, and the world in general, he hops over to his house and calls the sheriff.

The rest of the day was equally entertaining with all the neighbors gathering in my yard to talk about the great *attack*.

In the meantime, Charlie goes down to the doctor's where he gets a shot and eight stitches and comes home limping like he stepped on a land mine. The sheriff shows up and there is a lot of loud conversation between him, Dave, and Charlie. The upshot of it all being that Dave has got to keep Bear tied up from then on.

Dave does not take kindly to such orders and goes around the neighborhood telling everybody how Charlie caused the trouble by trespassing on his property. He allowed as how the sheriff and Charlie could both go directly to hell because Bear was the one that got hurt first and he had rights like anybody else.

Three days go by and Dave is still letting Bear run loose,

so Charlie calls the sheriff again. The sheriff is not a good man to ignore and he comes over mad as a wet cat in a sack. This time he tells Dave that he has to fence Bear in or he'll take him to the pound and have him put to sleep and Dave better believe him this time because he's as serious as a heart attack. I know all this because I was standing right there and heard the whole conversation. What really bothered me, however, was how quiet Dave got right at the end.

Charlie was as pleased with the sheriff's new orders as a kid with a .22 rifle. Came over and told me this would teach Dave to keep his damn dog away from his azaleas. Since I'd had more than enough of their foolishness by now, I told Charlie I thought he was making too much out of a dumb accident. Bear wasn't really a mean dog and he was a little old to be fenced in now. I strongly suggested he drop the whole mess and get the sheriff calmed down before he and Dave got into an argument they couldn't turn off.

Charlie's miserable temper came roaring out in full force and he used some extremely colorful words to tell me to mind my own business. I didn't appreciate what he said very much and kept things going by telling him he was the closest

thing I had ever seen to an ass walking around on two legs. Our discussion went downhill rapidly from there. I think it was then I realized that this was the first real battle Charlie had gotten into since he sold his tool and die business, and like an old war horse he was actually enjoying the fight. He intended to win, too. But knowing Dave I wasn't so sure he could.

Dave was as short and round as Charlie was long and lanky. He was bald and wore thick glasses, but his brown eyes had the same steely glint as Charlie's and he was just as stubborn. I suspected that way down he was even meaner. Sue told Margie that Dave came in the house and started cleaning his guns after the sheriff left that day.

Several of us in the neighborhood talked about it and decided Dave would probably cool things down by building Bear a nice fenced-in area in his back yard and then wait a while before trying to get back at Charlie. Especially since the sheriff seemed to be on Charlie's side at the moment. That's the kind of mistake you make when you believe people are reasonable, and if we had been thinking, it would have been very obvious that neither Dave nor Charlie fit into that category. They both knew they were in a war, and neither of them intended to



hoist any white flags. In fact, Dave got busy and stirred up more trouble the very next day.

Looking back, I think Dave spotted something when he bought the lot or maybe he just had a hunch the survey work had been a little sloppy in the past. Whatever the reason, his next move was a beauty.

For as long as I can remember the survey work on property around the lake had been done by Hank Thorton. Hank was now in his early seventies and a young fellow named Skip Keyes was taking over. So Dave called Skip and told him he wanted his property lines resurveyed so Charlie wouldn't get an inch that didn't belong to him when he put up the fence.

Skip came out and ran the lines. When he finished and all the stakes were in place, they showed that the old property lines were off about four feet on both sides of the lot. Charlie's azalea hedge was actually *on* Dave's property!

Dave is ecstatic. He calls Charlie out and shows him what Skip says. When Charlie finally understands what Dave is telling him, he gets like emergency red, starts spitting fire and cussing Dave and Skip at the same time. Skip gets pretty upset at the things Charlie is calling him, but Dave is laughing so hard tears are run-

ning down his cheeks and he can't even talk. He just whoops and Skip's mouth gets tighter until finally Charlie stops cussing long enough to run in his house and call Hank Thorton.

Hank comes bouncing up in a dirty black pickup truck about thirty minutes later. Charlie shouts at him for a while before Hank limps over to where Skip and his crew are standing watching the show and starts screaming at them for being a gaggle of incompetent fools and idiots. Skip is already mad and he doesn't take this too long before he begins yelling how Hank doesn't know a transit rod from a fishing pole and that the whole area is marked wrong because Hank has been using the wrong "point of beginning" for his surveys. He says it isn't just Dave and Charlie, but that every lot on the lake is four feet off line.

There was a big crowd of neighbors milling around in my yard by now and Skip got everybody's attention when he says all our property is legally screwed up. Hank is furious, of course, and says Skip talks big but he hasn't proved it to him yet. So Skip takes Hank off to show him where he made the mistake and all the neighbors start arguing about what it means if Skip is right.

Somebody must have called the sheriff again, since he drives



up in the middle of all the confusion and sits across the road in his patrol car, watching quietly and chewing on a dead cigar butt.

When Skip and Hank get back, Hank is obviously upset. He tells us that as much as he hates to admit it, Skip is right. All the lots have the correct amount of footage along the lake, but the side lines are four feet off. He threw in a lot more fancy words about how we could fix the problem, but it all boiled down to each of the property owners on the lake having to agree to deed four feet of their property to their neighbor. This would make the present surveys legally correct.

Charlie speaks up first and says that's fine with him and was looking around at the rest of us for support when Dave states flatly that it is certainly not agreeable to him. He wants the property he paid for and the damn fence is going on the correct line and he has no intention of discussing the matter any further.

Charlie's fury is pretty impressive even for him. Among all the cuss words you can make out that he intends to sue Dave, Skip, Hank, and anybody else he can think of. This got another burst of laughter out of Dave. Skip told him where he could put his lawyer and Hank said he wasn't going to worry

about any lawsuit that would take more years to settle than he had to live. Charlie turns purple and starts kicking the survey stakes out of the ground.

Skip comes alive at this and declares he has had a bellyful of Charlie's stupidity and that pulling up survey stakes in Florida is a first degree misdemeanor. He yells for the sheriff, who comes trotting over and tells Charlie that Skip is not lying. That Charlie better put the stakes back right now or he could be looking at a thousand dollar fine and a year in jail.

Charlie doesn't want to believe it, but the sheriff's face doesn't give him any choice. Also, Skip is yelling how he damn well is going to press charges if the stakes aren't back where they belong in five minutes. So Charlie takes a deep breath, grits his teeth, and starts putting the stakes back in the ground.

While he's doing this, the sheriff is trying to get Skip calmed down, Dave is sitting on the grass rocking from side to side totally helpless with laughter, and Charlie is trying to kill everybody with his eyes.

I figured it was best for us to leave and took all the neighbors around back of my place for a beer. We could hear the yelling and the laughing going on out front for another thirty minutes at least.

The next morning a fencing crew shows up and starts putting up a six foot high, chain link fence between Dave's property and Charlie's. Charlie comes out with a shotgun and the fencing crew picks up steel poles. I call the sheriff. He was obviously expecting trouble because he was already there when I went back outside. The sheriff takes Charlie's gun, tells the fencing crew to put down the poles and start putting up the fence.

Six of the neighbors come over to my yard to watch all the excitement. We thought the whole mess was funny, which goes to show how wrong even a group of people can be.

When I went back in my house, Mary and Sue were in the kitchen with Margie. They were crying. Dave and Charlie had told them not to see each other any more and Charlie was calling real estate agents about selling his house. Mary and Sue grab onto me and start in about how I had to do *something* to get Charlie and Dave back to normal. I told them this was not even a possibility. I had already tried and neither one of them was close to being rational. My honest opinion was that if anything was to be done it had to be pretty drastic and Mary and Sue had to do it. I was talking about the threat of divorce, but couldn't bring myself

to come right out and say it. Margie told me I was a *big* help and why didn't I just go eat lunch down at the hamburger place.

The next few days rocked along quietly. I tried to talk to Charlie and Dave again, but they wouldn't even speak to me. I did begin to have a faint hope that if they would stay away from each other for a while longer, time might begin to heal the split. That dream died the next day when Dave came out and started cutting down the azalea hedge.

Charlie sat on his front steps watching him like he was slicing up one of his kids.

I was disgusted with both of them by now and went in the house. Mary and Sue were there again with Margie. They were using our place as neutral ground—slipping off to talk and be together. I don't know if they were mad at me or not because they quit talking when I walked in and that was really unusual. I asked Margie if I could have some coffee and she just stared at me, too, so I left and went down to the hamburger place again.

Later in the day, I saw Dave begin digging up what was left of the azalea hedge. Charlie walked over to the fence and stood watching the final destruction a full minute before saying, "You shouldn't have

done that, Dave. I warned you. Don't forget that. I warned you!"

Dave acted like Charlie wasn't even there. He kept digging away and throwing the bare roots hard against the fence so the dirt fell in Charlie's yard. Charlie didn't say another word. He pounded once on the fence with his clenched fists, turned and went back to his steps where he sat with pure hate on his face. I got so nervous I went inside and watched the ball game.

It was a little after ten that same night when we heard the shots. They were fast and bunched together. Three or four with a pause and one more. Margie and me were in bed reading. She sat straight up and said, "Oh my God, they've done it."

There wasn't any doubt in my mind, either. I called the sheriff's office, pulled on some pants and shoes, grabbed a flashlight, and ran for the fence. I got there about three minutes before the first patrol car, but there was nothing I could do. They were both dead. One on one side of the fence and one on the other. Charlie was holding a .357 magnum and Dave was clutching an old army issue .45. The dog was dead, too. His body was about two feet from Dave's.

Mary and Sue were on opposite sides of the fence also, but close together. It was too dark

to see their faces. They were crying or talking—probably both, knowing them. I didn't pay much attention because a .45 and a .357 are big guns and it was a bloody mess. I got sick over by the side of Charlie's house. The sheriff came about that time and stood looking at all the blood and cussing soft-like at the two bodies. I swear I saw him wipe tears off his face, but it might have been sweat.

Margie gathered up Sue and Mary and took them to our house to wait on the doctor. It was really a bad night.

I finally got back to bed a bit after one. Margie slipped in beside me about two thirty. I tried to talk with her, but she said she wasn't in the mood. I just wish she had stayed that way.

There wasn't much to the inquest. Everybody knew what had happened and why. When the courts got through, Mary took Charlie back to Michigan to bury him and Sue took Dave to Ohio.

Neither one of them ever came back to the lake. They sold their homes and went down to Longboat Key where they bought a condominium. Margie hears from them off and on. She says they are fine and real happy.

The neighbors all got together and hired an attorney to straighten out the survey prob-

lems. So the fence came down and it's quiet out here again. I guess I'm the only one who's still got troubles over the "azalea war"—which is what everybody ended up calling it.

Margie says my problem is that I can't leave well enough alone. I keep picking at something until it unravels on me and then I get upset with what I find out.

"Why do you ask questions if you don't want to know the answers?" she yelled at me. She was right mad.

That was one day about eight months after the shootings when I was sitting on the end of my dock fishing. Margie came out with some iced tea and we started talking. I'll be honest and say she had asked me at least four times not to bring it up, but being me I got off on Dave and Charlie and how I tried to help.

Margie got white around the mouth and says, "I can see you're not going to be satisfied until you get me to admit it."

I should have left it alone, but like an idiot I asked, "Admit what?"

"That you did the right thing. I *wish* you had not told them to do it, but you did and it has worked out all right. I'll give you that."

Usually I know exactly what Margie means, but this time I was lost and said so.

"Don't try that *innocent* act with me, Jack Harrison. I have lived with you *too* long for that to work. I was right there when you told Mary and Sue to kill Dave and Charlie. I certainly did *not* approve of you giving such advice, even if it was the best thing for them to do."

I was totally confused by now and made the mistake of saying, "What in the blue-eyed world are you talking about? Sue and Mary didn't kill anybody. Charlie and Dave shot each other. Everybody knows that."

"Don't be ridiculous!" she snapped. "Charlie and Dave did no such thing. They were having too good a time to end it by shooting each other. You can be terribly dense sometimes. Men like Charlie and Dave love to fight. Sue told me Dave was enjoying his war with Charlie more than anything else he'd done since he retired. Mary said Charlie was the same way. Those two mean men would have happily gone on fighting with each other for years. The two who were miserable were Mary and Sue. It was their old lives all over again and that was hard to face."

"I had no idea they hated their husbands," I said quietly.

"They didn't *hate* anybody," Margie explained patiently. "They loved them—as much as they were allowed to. Their

problem was that Charlie and Dave gave them everything but companionship. That was what they needed most. I don't even think they minded Charlie and Dave fighting. They were used to that. They just couldn't accept being lonely again."

"I still don't think they did it," I said defensively.

Margie cocked her head to one side, smiled and asked, "Did anyone ever check to see which gun killed Bear?"

"That never came into question," I admitted. "They proved Dave's gun killed Charlie and Charlie's gun killed Dave and we all knew why."

"You just thought you did," Margie insisted, "but if anyone had taken the time to look into it, they would have found that the same gun that killed Charlie also killed Bear. You know good and well Dave never shot his own dog."

"It could have been an accident," I protested, "but whatever happened I never told Mary and Sue to kill anybody."

"You most certainly did!" she insisted. "You said that something 'drastic' had to be done and they were the only ones who could do it."

"I was talking about divorce!"

"You can say that now, but that is not the way it sounded,"

she stated firmly. "I knew what you meant as well as they did. I tried to stop them, but they decided you were right."

"I don't know everything that happened that night, but I do know they made up some lie and got Dave and Charlie out to the fence. Then Sue shot Charlie with Dave's gun and Mary shot Dave with Charlie's. The last shot we heard was when Bear saw Dave hurt and went after the only person he could reach—Sue. Sue said the only thing she could do was shoot him. I don't think she ever liked Bear much anyway. Then they put the guns in Charlie's and Dave's hands and started screaming. Everybody was so all-fired smart they decided Charlie and Dave had shot each other and never looked any further for an explanation. Mary said that's what would happen."

"How can you know all this, Margie? You were in bed with me that night."

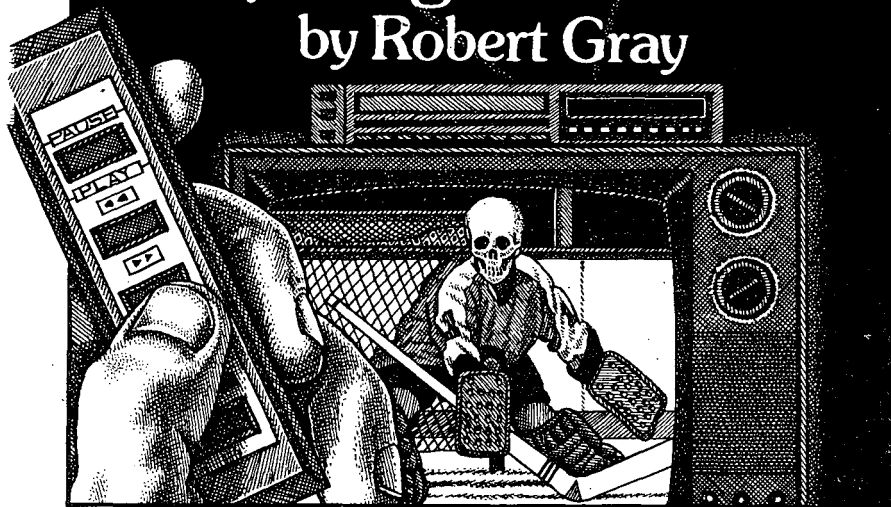
"When I got them over to our house after the shootings, I asked them and they told me," she replied.

"Then why didn't you tell the sheriff?"

Margie looked shocked. "When it was all *your* idea! Don't be foolish. Now what do you want for lunch?"

# If There's Anything We Can Do

by Robert Gray



**R**ewind: the remote-control unit was slick with sweat from Ben's palm. On the television screen, hockey players skated backwards frantically. If he concentrated, he could just see the puck leap from within the net, scoot over the goalie's outstretched arms, then fly through a tangle of colliding bodies until it came to rest on the stick of the shooter, who was waiting near the blue line.

Play: the stick blade, which was pulling back, now slashed down again, firing the hard slapshot. The goalie reacted instinctively; flopping to the ice with a scissors-kick motion. He misjudged the shot's angle, however, and neglected to adjust for the puck's tendency to rise. This proved to be a disastrous combination.

After the goal, the scorer's teammates rushed over to congratulate him. His opponents bowed their heads in shame. But there was nothing they could do about it now; water under, spilled milk, and all that jazz.

When the camera focused on the hometown crowd, arms waved madly and a sea of heads bobbed and danced. They were cheering too, but the volume was turned down so Ben wouldn't have to listen to them.

The camera zoomed in for what they call a "honey shot," the customarily beautiful young woman in the stands. This particular one had cinnamon-colored hair, a perfect white smile, and incandescent blue eyes; the home team's colors, in fact.

She was celebrating the goal with her boyfriend, who hugged her proudly with one arm while clapping his right hand against her left.

They looked incredibly happy together in those brief seconds before the camera returned its attention to the ice. Ben envied them; envied their joy; envied a goddam bunch of colored electronic dots in his own living room. He was losing it.

Stop: the VCR did its usual bump and grind routine, sounding as if it was snacking on his videotape. Then silence resumed, and a morning cartoon filled the screen.

Rewind.

A happy couple. Jenny had told him once, a long time ago, that she wanted to die in his arms. It was a casual remark, meaningless really, under the circumstances. They had been more than a little stoned, lying together in a sleeping bag, by the fireplace at a Sandy Lake cottage they had rented for a month that summer.

Yeah, she wanted to die in his arms. His answer? He'd pulled her close and said it was okay by him so long as she promised not to explode. Wise guy. As it turned out, she did die in his arms. She did not explode.

After her death, he didn't leave the apartment for two weeks, not even for work. He answered the telephone once in a while, but sometimes left it off the hook for hours. Treated his front door likewise.

Relatives swarmed in from out of town; a few were his, most hers. People in his building dropped off tons of food. Casseroles and cellophane-covered trays; baked beans, lasagna and macaroni salads, breads and cakes, soups and stews.

Despite all this bounty, Ben hadn't eaten a decent meal since it happened. Occasionally he peeled back the foil on a dish for a spoonful of something, but hardly noticed what he was shoving into his mouth. He would have to deal with the situation pretty



damn soon, however. Some of that food must be heading toward science project territory by now.

In the kitchen, Ben plugged in the percolator to re-heat yesterday's coffee. When it was ready, he poured the foul-smelling brew into a mug and took it to the living room. He sat on the couch, which had disappeared under the mound of sheets, pillows, and blankets that he'd lugged in from the bedroom. Couldn't sleep there just yet.

On the screen, Fred Flintstone was trying to con Barney into going along with another one of his crazy schemes. When Betty Rubble and Wilma showed up to kibitz, Ben pawed at the remote control and they all disappeared. It was time to go to work.

As he pulled into the mall parking lot and drove out behind the Chase Food Markets building, Ben fought to catch his breath and keep down the coffee. Nerves.

He locked his car and climbed the cement stairs of the loading dock, then pressed a button next to the double steel doors. A bell rang inside. He waited a minute, hit the button again.

The security bars rattled as they were taken off the doors, which swung open towards him. He stepped out of their path.

"'Bout goddam time you guys . . ." Art, the assistant manager, began. He had a wiseass smirk pasted across his face, but when he saw Ben, he suddenly looked three shades paler and in great pain. "Ben . . . thought you were the produce truck. It's late as usual. What else is new, right? . . . So how you doing, buddy? Good to see you again."

Ben shrugged as he stepped inside. "Thought I'd better get out of that goddam apartment. Back in harness."

"Yeah, sure. Probably the best thing. Coffee's on. I'll buy you one."

It wasn't as bad as he'd feared it would be. Gerry, the store manager, and his new bookkeeper were the only other people in the break room. They had already said the right things at the funeral. They'd sent flowers and probably baked beans for all he knew.

Now they made very careful small talk, took long sips from their Styrofoam cups, and managed to find pressing work to do sooner than they normally would have.

He walked with Art down the aisles that were Ben's responsibility to order and stock: cake mixes, pet foods, and cereals. They were in terrible condition, and this was only Monday, a full two days before the next freight delivery. There were only two boxes

of Duncan Hines white cake mix left. Gold Medal flour five-pounders, on sale this week, were gone completely, their four foot section on the bottom shelf empty and coated in fine white dust.

"Pretty gruesome," muttered Ben, putting a finger against one of the cake mix boxes and tipping it over.

"Sorry, Ben. Had to let the part-timers work your aisles last week. They sure stunk up the joint, but I was buried myself; couldn't do everything. Maybe you can find some stuff out back to plug some of the major holes. Johnson's making the tour today, so we'd better dress 'em up as much as we can."

Johnson was the district manager. He was paid sixty grand per, just to stroll through a couple of dozen stores, drop snide remarks, and shake his head with disgust as he lectured at length on subjects ranging from labor cost overruns to inventory control to employee haircuts. Nice work if you could get it.

In the cavernous back storeroom, Ben grabbed an empty freight cart and pulled it over to the cake mix pallet, on which were stacked maybe twenty-five cases of excess stock.

He began loading the cart with anything he thought he could make use of as temporary filler. Under three bales of Pillsbury flour that he planned to disguise the Gold Medal hole with, Ben discovered a busted case of molasses. One of the part-timers must've hidden it there to avoid dealing with the sorry mess. Ben left it for the time being. He had enough problems already.

Jenny had mentioned a trial separation at other times during their relationship, but he hadn't taken her seriously until this last one. She had a temper, and said things in the middle of a fight that she later regretted or forgot.

They weren't married, so it was never a question of divorce. Still, they had been together nearly five years. There weren't any marriages that old among his friends.

He had asked her what her problem was; what "their" problem was, as she corrected him. She said it was a lot of things, little things, none in particular; an accumulation. That was her word for it: accumulation.

He told her he wouldn't let go easy, and he kept his word. She got away in the end, but not like she thought she was going to.

When his cart was loaded, Ben pulled it through the two red plastic doors that separated back room from main floor. Fluorescent

banks of overhead lighting were just coming on in a slow wave from one side of the store to the other, as if his entrance had triggered them. Somebody in the office threw the switch on the canned music system, and a cheery pop tune was being strangled by violin strings.

It felt good to work again. After Ben picked up a new boxcutter at the office, he sliced open the top of a cake mix case, skillfully avoiding the packages inside with his blade. He yanked off the top and sent it flying to a nearby grocery cart. Then he pulled his price gun from the vinyl holster on his belt and rapidly marked the boxes.

After the freight cart was empty, he went through the section and faced it all off, pulling rows of products forward on the shelves until the aisle looked nearly perfect, its gaps filled in. Boxes, bags, and jars were lined up now like disciplined troops ready for inspection.

In the storeroom, Ben picked up the case of molasses gently, its rotting bottom straining to give out. He carried it to the men's room and set it down on the tile floor near the sink. Then he turned on the hot water tap and reluctantly opened the box to inspect the grisly damage: three jars smashed, nine caked in goo.

The water was steaming as he laid the first jar under the faucet and watched the molasses grudgingly melt away. Darkening water sluiced down the drain like brown blood.

They had never been much for talk, he and Jenny. Not the kind of talk that solved problems, anyway. But he had thought they were, if not deliriously happy, at least content with one another's company; like old bluejeans, patched in spots but still comfortable.

He had fallen for her the first day she came to work at the store as Jerry's bookkeeper. The rest was what they call history.

There had been a few dates, then a few more, then nights spent at his place or hers, and finally somebody's bright idea to split one rent instead of wasting two.

He had offered to marry her if she thought that would help. Jenny said his proposal sounded too much like he was negotiating the price for a case of lettuce. And she said no.

Ben put the clean molasses jars in an empty plastic milk case which he took out and loaded on his cart. Then he gathered the remains of the box, cleaned the men's room floor, and dumped the sticky cardboard pieces in the trash room.

He piled his cart with cases of pet food. It occurred to him that he could get a dog now if he wanted one. Jenny hated dogs; said they weren't worth keeping in a city apartment. There was a fine-looking collie on the Purina Dog Chow bags.

"Cake mixes look a hundred percent better," Art yelled over as he burst through the red doors.

"Thanks," Ben replied.

Art disappeared into the break room for a minute, then came back out with a coffee in one hand and a sugar doughnut in the other. He leaned against a nearby pallet. "You doing anything tonight?"

"Uh-uh. Nothing special, why?" Ben grunted as he hoisted a fifty pound bale of dog food on top of his already precarious load.

"Want to catch the game?"

The game was hockey; only game in town this time of year. Art was a big fan, and so was Ben. A local beer distributor gave the store two complimentary season tickets every year. Ben went to the arena whenever he wasn't working a nightshift and the seats were up for grabs. He videotaped the games he couldn't get to. He knew three of the players personally, from a promotional appearance they made at the store representing the beer distributor.

"Might be a good idea at that," said Ben. "Get me out of the goddam house."

He often went to the games with Art. Jerry was the only other person at the store who got much use from the tickets. He used them once in a while to impress dates with his "pull."

They were great seats, near center ice and just above the glass.

"Good enough," said Art. "Leave around six? I'll pick you up. We can catch the warmups."

"Sure."

While working the pet food aisle, Ben noticed one of the cashiers bearing down on him as she headed out for her break.

"How's it going, Ben?" she asked.

"Hi, Martha. Okay."

She stopped, as if suddenly realizing that there was something unusual today about their usual greeting. Then she reached over and clutched at his shirtsleeve.

"Ben, how's it going really?"

"Okay . . . really."

"You know, I told you at the funeral, if there's anything Phil and I can do, anything at all, just you say the word."

"Thanks, Martha. I'll do that."

"Such a tragedy. You'd think this was New York, for God's sake. Attacked like that in your very own neighborhood. Scares me, Ben. It really does. What's this world coming to, will you tell me?"

"I don't know, Martha."

"Now remember, Ben, if there's . . ."

He and Jenny went out together the night before it happened, though "out" and "together" were both mild exaggerations. What they did was walk to the local tavern at the same time, sit at the same table, and stare into space over their beers for three long hours.

The things he said were the things he thought she wanted to hear. He would change, pay more attention to her, go out to dinner or a movie once in a while. Maybe even dancing; she liked dancing.

Jenny responded to none of this. He finally asked the tough question, the one he'd been trying not to think about; was there another guy?

She laughed softly, as if to herself, but didn't answer that one either.

It was like reasoning with an empty chair. She didn't hear him, wouldn't listen. He knew then that he was going to lose her. Though he didn't come to a final decision in that bar, it was probably at this point he first considered killing rather than losing her.

Ben punched out an hour early. The day had been tough on him in many ways, but tomorrow would be easier. People would gradually stop talking about it, asking him how he felt and telling him how goddam sorry they were. It would all become nothing more than a bad memory for them, a shadow in the past. Remember Jenny? they would ask. Didn't she use to be the bookkeeper? Died tragically, mugged in the alley right next to her apartment building, her throat slit. Another act of senseless violence in a violent age.

The odds of catching the murderer were long, according to the authorities; one in a bit less than a million, which was the city's population. Even higher if you included tourists and vagrants.

Ben was home by five. He showered and dressed, then cracked open a beer. He sat on the couch, switched on the television and VCR.

Play/Fast Forward: the first period flashed by on the screen while

Ben was reading the newspaper. Jenny's death had rated only page six treatment when it happened. Now the incident was ancient history as far as the media were concerned. Same with the police; a few routine questions at the scene, chalk outline on the alley pavement, reports filed and soon forgotten.

Play: score at the end of one period: Wings 3, Gliders 1. As the game moved into the second period, Ben slowed the tape to normal speed and watched as both teams waltzed back and forth at center ice. Somebody had apparently posted no-trespassing signs over the goals.

Ben had another beer. He grew restless along with the crowd, waiting for a rally or a fight. The fight came first, after which the action picked up considerably, with the home town Gliders scoring twice on power plays to edge into a three-all tie. The puck began to spend more time in the Wings' zone as the Gliders took full advantage of a sharp momentum swing in their favor.

He'd been watching the puck intently as it slid, hopped, and flew over the ice from stick to stick. Now, strangely, he found himself studying the Wings goalie. The poor guy didn't know it yet, but he was doomed to failure in spite of his gallant acrobatics. The game's final score would be 4-3 Gliders, and the winning tally was coming up soon, at the 14:37 mark of the second period.

The goalie wore one of those molded plastic masks, bone white with dark holes cut for his eyes, like a skull. He crouched low to the ice, head moving with the puck, his squat body shifting from side to side in front of the goal.

When one of the Gliders flicked a shot at him, the goalie kicked out a padded right leg. The puck hit his skate boot and deflected harmlessly away. One of his defensemen cradled it with his stick and passed to a teammate breaking up ice.

As the camera followed the puck into the Gliders' zone, Ben's mind wandered. He imagined the Wings goalie, alone now at the other end of the rink. He would be tense, under pressure, aware of expectations, anxiously watching the puck's distant movements. He would adjust a leg pad, pound his stick into the glove on his left hand, or use it to tap the goalposts behind him to get his bearings.

The crowd noise increased dramatically, and Ben knew disaster was imminent. The Gliders were coming back with a 3-on-2 advantage. When they crossed the blue line, the Wings goalie appeared on screen again, in his crouch and edging slightly forward to cut down the shooting angles.

The Gliders right wing put a terrific fake on his defender, then passed to a cutting teammate, who got off his slapshot while the puck was still moving.

Sticks flashed and bodies collided. Ben had seen this score in slow motion replay many times. He had no trouble following the puck. In fact, it almost seemed to float above the ice, advancing on the helpless goalie with unstoppable impetus. It all seemed dream-like, even at normal film speed.

The goalie dropped to his split, then fell back toward the goal mouth as he realized his mistake and tried in vain to compensate for it. He was a tangle of flailing arms and legs. The puck flew over him as he lunged desperately to swat it away.

He might as well have been swatting butterflies. The disc found a crack between the tip of his glove and the crossbar, and was gently caught by the soft netting behind.

The celebration was on again, and the camera panned the crowd as Glider fans went nuts.

Pause/Still: the "honey shot"; colored dots looking like the perfect couple; fabrication and fantasy.

No, not fantasy. Not the first time Ben watched this game, nor the tenth. The freeze frame showed Section G, Row 7, seats 24 and 25. The perfect couple: Jenny and Art.

He reached into his pants pocket and took out the new boxcutter. He pushed it open, exposing the blade. Couldn't use it on Art, though. Have to be more creative this time.

Play: the goalie had struggled to his feet again by the time the camera returned its attention to the ice. He dug the puck out of the net with the blade of his stick, then rifled it away in disgust. This was the only outward display of his grief, of his anger, of his shame.

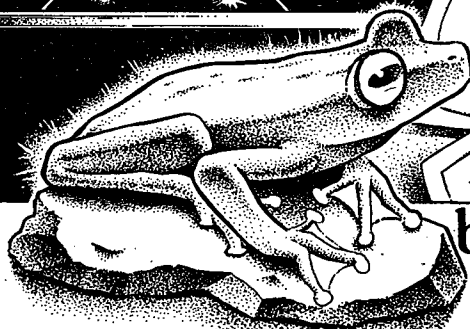
The doorbell rang. Art was here to pick him up. His buddy. Ben closed the boxcutter and tossed it on the coffee table.

On screen, the goalie leaned back against his crossbar and stared hard at the ice in front of him, his skull mask impassive, betraying nothing. His teammates skated by and tapped lightly at his leg pads with their sticks. To Ben, they seemed to be saying, much too late, "If there's anything we can do . . ."



MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Corner Shop



by Cynthia  
Asquith

S. LONG

**P**eter Wood's executors found their task a very easy one. He had left his affairs in perfect order. The only surprise yielded by his methodical writing table was a sealed envelope on which was written: "Not wishing to be bothered by well-meaning Research Societies, I have never shown the enclosed to anyone, but after my death all are welcome to read what, to the best of my knowledge, is a true story."

The manuscript, which bore a date three years previous to the death of the writer, was as follows.

"I have long wished to record an experience of my youth. I won't attempt any explanation. I draw no conclusions. I merely narrate certain events.

"One foggy evening, at the end of a day of enforced idleness in my chambers—I had just been called to the Bar—I was rather dejectedly walking back to my lodgings when my attention was drawn to the brightly lit window of a shop. Seeing the word 'Antiques' on its signboard, and remembering that I owed a wedding present to a lover of bric-a-brac, I grasped the handle of the green door. Opening with one of those cheerful jingle-jangle bells, it admitted me into large rambling premises, thickly crowded with all the traditional treasure and trash of a curiosity shop. Suits of armor, warming-pans, cracked, misted mirrors, church vestments, spinning-wheels, brass kettles, chandeliers, gongs, chessmen—furniture of every size and every period. Despite all the clutter, there was none of the dusty gloom one associates with such collections. Far from being dingy, the room was brightly lit and a crackling fire leapt up the chimney. In fact, the atmosphere was so warm and cheerful that after the cold dank fog outside it struck me as most agreeable.

"At my entrance, a young woman and a girl—by their resemblance obviously sisters—rose from armchairs. Bright, bustling, gaily dressed, they were curiously unlike the type of people who usually preside over such wares. A flower or a cakeshop would have seemed a far more appropriate setting. Inwardly awarding them high marks for keeping the place so clean, I wished the sisters good evening. Their smiling faces and easy manners made a very pleasant impression on me; but though they were most obliging in showing me all their treasures and displayed considerable knowledge as well as appreciation, they seemed wholly indifferent as to whether or not I made any purchase.

"I found a small piece of Sheffield plate very moderately priced,

and decided that this was the very present for my friend. Explaining that I was without sufficient cash, I asked the elder sister if she would take a check.

"'Certainly,' she answered, briskly producing pen and ink. 'Will you please make it out to the "Corner Curio Shop"?"

"It was with conscious reluctance that I left the cheerful precincts and plunged back into the saffron fog.

"'Good evening, sir. Always pleased to see you at any time,' rang out the elder sister's pleasant voice, a voice so engaging that I left almost with a sense of having made a friend.

"I suppose it must have been a week later that, as I walked home one bitter cold evening—fine powdery snow brushing against my face, a cutting wind lashing down the streets—I remembered the welcoming warmth of the cheerful Corner Shop, and decided to revisit it. I found myself to be in the very street, and there—yes!—there was the very corner.

"It was with a sense of disappointment out of all proportion to the event that I found the shop wore that baffling, shut-eyed appearance, and read the uncompromising word CLOSED.

"An icy gust of wind whistled round the corner; my wet trousers flapped dismally against my chapped ankles. Longing for the warmth and glow within, I felt annoyingly thwarted. Rather childishly—for I was certain the door was locked—I grasped the handle and shook it. To my surprise it turned in my hand, but not in answer to its pressure. The door was opened from within, and I found myself looking into the dimly-lit countenance of a very old and extremely frail-looking little man.

"'Please to come in, sir,' said a gentle, rather tremulous voice, and feeble footsteps shuffled away ahead of me.

"It is impossible to describe the altered aspect of the place. I supposed the electric light had fused, for the darkness of the large room was thinned only by two guttering candles, and in their wavering light, dark shapes of furniture, formerly brightly lit, now loomed towering and mysterious, casting weird, almost menacing shadows. The fire was out. Only one faintly glowing ember told that any had lately been alive. Other evidence there was none, for the grim cold of the atmosphere was such as I had never experienced. The phrase 'it struck chill' is laughably inadequate. In retrospect the street seemed almost agreeable. At least its biting cold there had been bracing. One way and another the atmosphere of the shop was now as gloomy as it had been bright before. I felt a

strong impulse to leave at once, but the surrounding darkness thinned, and I saw the old man busily lighting candles here and there.

"Anything I can show you, sir?" he quavered, approaching, taper in hand. I now saw him comparatively distinctly. His appearance made an indescribable impression on me. As I stared, Rembrandt flitted through my mind. Who else could have given any idea of the weird shadows on that ravaged face? 'Tired' is a word we use lightly. Never before had I known what it might mean. Such ineffable, patient weariness! Deep sunk in his withered face, the eyes seemed as extinct as the fire. And the wan frailty of the small, tremulous, bent frame!

"The words 'dust and ashes, dust and ashes' strayed through my brain.

"On my first visit, I had, you may remember, been surprised by the uncharacteristic cleanliness of the place. The queer fancy now struck me that this old man was like an accumulation of all the dust one might have expected to find distributed over such premises. In truth, he looked scarcely more solid than a mere conglomeration of dust and cobwebs that might be dispersed at a breath or a touch.

"What a fantastic old creature to be employed by those well-to-do looking girls! He must, I thought, be some old retainer kept on out of charity.

"Anything I can show you, sir?" repeated the old man. His voice had little more body than the tearing of a cobweb; but there was a curious, almost pleading insistence in it, and his eyes were fixed on me in a wan yet devouring stare. I wanted to leave, yes at once. The mere proximity of the poor old man distressed me—made me feel wretchedly dispirited; nonetheless, involuntarily murmuring, 'Thank you, I'll look round,' I found myself following his frail form, and absentmindedly inspecting various objects temporarily illuminated by his trembling taper.

"The chill silence broken only by the tired shuffle of his carpet slippers got on my nerves.

"Very cold night," I hazarded.

"Cold, is it? Cold? Yes, I dare say it is cold." In his grey voice was the apathy of utter indifference.

"For how many years, I wondered, had this poor old fellow been 'incapable of his own distress'?"

"Been at this job long?" I asked, dully contemplating a four-poster bed.

"'A long, long, long time.' The answer came softly as a sigh, and as he spoke, time seemed no longer a matter of days, weeks, months, years, but a weariness that stretched immeasurably. Suddenly I began to resent the old man's exhaustion and melancholy, the contagion of which so unaccountably weighed down my own spirits.

"'How long, O Lord, how long?' I said as jauntily as I could manage, adding with odious jocularly, 'Old age pension about due, what?'

"No response.

"In silence he drifted across the other side of the room.

"'Quaint piece, this,' said my guide, picking up a grotesque little frog that lay on a shelf amongst various other odds and ends. It seemed to be made of some substance similar to jade—soapstone I guessed. Struck by its oddity, I took the frog from the old man's hand. It was strangely cold.

"'Rather fun,' I said. 'How much?'

"'Half a crown, sir,' whispered the old man, glancing up at my face. Again his voice was scarcely more audible than the slithering of dust, but there was a queer gleam in his eyes. Was it eagerness? Could it be?

"'Only half a crown? Is that all? I'll have it,' said I. 'Don't bother to pack up old Anthony Rowley. I'll put him in my pocket.'

"As I gave the old man the coin, I inadvertently touched his hand. I could scarcely suppress a start. I have said the frog struck cold, but, compared to that desiccated skin, its substance was tepid! I can't describe the chill of that second's contact. Poor old fellow! thought I, he isn't fit to be about—not in this lonely place. I wonder those kind-looking girls allow such an old wreck to struggle on.

"'Goodnight,' I said.

"'Goodnight, sir. Thank you, sir,' quavered the feeble old voice. He shut the door behind me.

"Turning my head as I breasted the driving snow, I saw his form, scarcely more solid than a shadow, dimly outlined against the candlelight. His face was pressed against the big glass pane, and as I walked away I pictured his exhausted, patient eyes peering after me.

"Somehow I was unable to dismiss the thought of that old, old man. Long, long after I was in bed and courting sleep I saw that ravaged face with its maze of wrinkles, those great eyes like lifeless planets, staring, staring at me, and in their steady gaze there seemed something that beseeched. Yes, I was strangely perturbed by that old man.

"Even after I achieved sleep, my dreams were full of him. Haunted, I suppose by a sense of his infinite tiredness, I was trying to force him to rest—to compel him to lie down. But no sooner did I succeed in laying out his frail form on the four-poster bed I had seen in the shop—only now it seemed more like a grave than a bed, and the brocade coverlet had turned into sods of turf—than he would slip from my grasp, and totteringly resume his rambles round and round the shop. On and on I chased him, down endless avenues of weird furniture, but still he eluded me.

"Now the dim shop seemed to stretch on and on unendingly—to merge into an infinity of sunless, airless space until at length, exhausted, breathless, I myself collapsed and sank into the four-poster grave.

"The very next morning an urgent summons took me out of London, and in the anxiety of the ensuing week the episode of the Corner Shop was banished from my mind. As soon as my father was pronounced out of danger, I returned to my dreary lodgings. Dejectedly engaged in adding up my wretched bills and wondering where on earth to find the money to pay my next quarter's rent, I was agreeably surprised by a visit from an old schoolfellow, at that time practically the only friend I had in London. He was employed by one of the best known firms of Fine Art Dealers and Auctioneers.

"After some minutes' conversation, he rose in search of a light. My back was turned to him. I heard the sharp scratch of a match, followed by propitiatory noises to his pipe. Suddenly they were broken off by an exclamation.

"'Good God, man!' he shouted. 'Where did you get this?'

"Turning my head, I saw he had snatched up my purchase of the other night, the funny little frog, whose presence on my mantelpiece I had all but forgotten.

"Closely scrutinizing it through a magnifying glass, he held it under the gas jet, his hands shaking with excitement.

"'Where *did* you get this?' he repeated. 'Have you any idea what it is?'

"Briefly I told him that rather than leave a shop empty-handed I had bought the frog for a half a crown.

"'Half a crown! My dear fellow, I can't swear to it, but I believe you've had one of those amazing pieces of luck one hears of. Unless I'm very much mistaken, this is a piece of jade of the Hsia Dynasty. If so, it's practically unique.'

"These words conveyed little to my ignorance.

"Do you mean it's worth money?"

"Worth money? Phew!" he ejaculated. "Look here. Will you leave this business to me? Let me have the thing for my firm to handle. They'll do the best they can by you. I shall be able to get it into Thursday's sale."

"Certain that I could implicitly trust my friend, I agreed. Reverently unwrapping the frog in cotton wool, he hurried off.

"Friday morning I had the shock of my life. Shock does not necessarily imply bad news.

"I assure you that for some seconds after opening the one envelope lying on my dingy breakfast tray, the room spun round and round. The envelope contained an account from Messrs. Spunk, Fine Art Dealers and Auctioneers: 'To sale of Hsia jade, £2,000, less ten percent commission, £1,800,' and there, neatly folded, made out to Peter Wood, was Messrs. Spunks' check for eighteen hundred pounds! For some time I was completely bewildered. My friend's words had raised hopes—hopes that my chance purchase might facilitate the payment of next quarter's rent—might possibly even provide for a whole year's rent—but that so large a sum was involved had never so much as crossed my mind. Could it be true, or was it some hideous joke? Surely, in the trite phrase, it was much, much too good to be true! It wasn't the sort of thing that happened to oneself.

"Still feeling physically dizzy, I rang up my friend. His voice and the heartiness of his congratulations convinced me of the truth of my astounding good fortune. It was neither joke, nor dream. I, Peter Wood, whose bank account was at present twenty pounds overdrawn, who, but for shares amounting to one hundred and fifty pounds, possessed no securities whatever, now held in my hand a piece of paper convertible into eighteen hundred golden sovereigns! I sat down to think, to try to realize, to readjust. From my jumble of plans, problems, and emotions, one fact emerged crystal clear. Obviously I could not take advantage of that nice girl's ignorance, nor of her poor old caretaker's incompetence—whichever was to blame. No, I couldn't accept this amazing gift from fate, merely because, by a sheer fluke, I had bought a treasure for half a crown.

"Clearly I must give back at least half the sum to my unconscious benefactors. Otherwise I should feel I had robbed them almost as if, like a thief in the night, I had broken into their shop. I remembered their pleasant, open countenances. What fun to astonish them with my wonderful news! I felt a strong impulse to rush to



the shop, but having for once a case in court, was obliged to go to the Temple. Endorsing Messrs. Spunks' check, I addressed it to my bankers, and filled in one of my own for nine hundred pounds made out to the Corner Curio Shop.

"It was late before I was free to leave the Law Courts, and, when I arrived at the shop I was disappointed but not surprised to read the notice CLOSED. Even supposing the old caretaker to be on duty, there was no particular point in seeing him. My business was with his mistress. Deciding to postpone my visit to the following day, I was just on the point of hurrying home when exactly as though I were expected, the door opened. There on the threshold stood the old man peering out into the darkness.

" 'Anything I can do for you, sir?'

"His voice was even queerer than before. I now realized that I had dreaded re-encountering him; yet I found myself irresistibly compelled to enter. The atmosphere was as grimly cold as on my last visit. I felt myself actually shiver. Several candles, obviously only just lit, were burning. By their glimmer I saw the old man's questioning gaze intently fixed on me. What a face! I had not exaggerated its weirdness. Never had I seen anyone so singular, so striking. No wonder I had dreamt of him. How I wished he had not opened the door!

" 'Anything I can show you tonight, sir?' His voice trembled.

" 'No, thanks. I've come about that thing you sold me the other day. I find it's of great value. Please tell your mistress that I'll pay her a proper price for it tomorrow.'

"As I spoke there spread over the old man's face the most wonderful smile. I use the word 'smile' for lack of a better word, but how to convey the beauty of the indefinable expression that transfigured that time-worn face? Tender triumph; gentle joy; rapturous reverence. What mystery did I witness? It was like iron frost yielding to sunshine—the thawing of grief in the dawn-radiance of some unsurmisable redemption. For the first time in my life I had some inkling of the word 'beatitude.'

"I can't describe the impression made on me. The moment, as it were, brimmed over. Time ceased. I became conscious of infinite things.

"The silence was now broken by the gathering-itself-together sound of an old clock about to strike. I turned my head towards one of those wonderful, intricate pieces of mediaeval workmanship—a Nuremburg grandfather clock. From the recess beneath

its exquisitely painted face, quaint figures emerged, and while one struck a bell, others demurely stepped through the mazes of a minuet. My attention was riveted by the pretty spectacle. Not till the last sounds had trembled into silence did I turn my head.

"I found myself alone.

"The old man had vanished. Surprised that he should leave me, I looked all round the large room. Oddly enough, the fire, which I had supposed dead, had flared into unexpected life, and now cast a cheerful glow; but neither fire nor candlelight revealed any trace of the old caretaker.

" 'Hullo? Hullo?' I called interrogatively.

"No answer. No sound save the loud ticking of clocks and the crackle of the fire. I walked all round the big room. I even looked into the great four-poster bed of my dreams. Then I saw that there was a smaller adjoining room. Snatching up a candle, I hastened to explore this. At its far end I discovered a winding staircase leading up to a little gallery. The old man must have withdrawn into some upstairs lair. I would follow him. I groped my way to the foot of the stairs, and began to climb, but the steps creaked under my feet; I was conscious of crumbling woodwork. There was an icy draft; my candle went out. Cobwebs brushed against my face. To go any farther was most uninviting. I desisted.

"After all, what did it matter? Let the old man hide himself!

"I had given my message. Best be gone. But the main room to which I had returned was now quite warm and cheerful. What had ever made me think it sinister? It was with a distinct sense of regret that I left the shop. I felt baulked. I longed to see that radiant face again. Strange old man! How could I ever have fancied that I feared him?

"The next Saturday I was free to go straight to the shop. All the way there my mind was agreeably occupied anticipating the welcome the grateful sisters were sure to give me. As the jingle-jangle of the bell announced my opening of the door, the two girls, who were busily dusting their goods, turned to see who came at so unusually early an hour. Recognizing me, to my surprise they bowed amiably but quite casually, as though to a mere acquaintance.

"With such a fairy-tale bond between us, I had expected a very different kind of greeting. I supposed that they had not yet heard the news, and when I told them I had brought the check, I saw that my surmise was right. They looked quite blank.

"Check?"

"Yes, for the frog I bought the other day."

"Frog? What frog? I only remember your buying a piece of Sheffield plate."

"So they knew nothing, not even of my second visit to their shop! By degrees I told them the whole story. They were overcome with astonishment. The elder sister seemed quite dazed."

"But I *can't* understand it! I can't understand it!" she repeated. 'Holmes, the old caretaker, isn't even supposed to admit anyone in our absence—far less to sell things. He merely comes to take charge on the evenings we leave early, and is only supposed to stay till the night policeman comes on duty. I can't believe he let you in and never told us he'd sold you something. It's too extraordinary! What time was it?"

"Round about six, I should think."

"He generally leaves at half past five," said the girl. "But I suppose the policeman must have been late."

"It was later when I came yesterday."

"Did you come again?" she asked.

"Briefly I told her of my visit and the message I had left with the caretaker."

"What an extraordinary thing!" she exclaimed. "I can't begin to understand it. But we shall soon hear his explanation. I expect him at any moment now. He comes in every morning to sweep the floors."

"At the prospect of meeting the remarkable old man again I felt a thrill of excitement. How would he look by daylight? Should I see him smile again?"

"Very old, isn't he?" I hazarded.

"Old? Yes, I suppose he is getting on, but it's a very easy job. He's a good, honest fellow. I can't imagine his doing anything on the sly. I'm afraid we've been rather slack in our cataloguing lately. I wonder if he does sell odds and ends for himself? Oh no, I can't believe it! By the way, can you remember whereabouts this frog was?"

"I pointed to the shelf from which the caretaker had produced the piece of jade."

"Oh, from that odd lot I bought the other day for next to nothing. I haven't sorted or priced any of the things yet. I can't remember any frog. What an incredible thing to happen!"

"At this moment the telephone rang. She lifted the receiver."

"'Hullo? Hullo? Yes, Miss Wilson speaking. Yes, Mrs. Holmes, what is it?'

"A few seconds' startled pause, and then, 'Dead? *Dead?* But how? Why? Oh, I *am* sorry!'

"After a few more words she replaced the receiver and turned to us, her eyes full of tears.

"'Oh, Bessie,' she said to her sister. 'Poor old Holmes is dead. When he got home yesterday he complained of pain, and he died in the middle of the night—heart failure. No one had any idea there was anything the matter with him. Oh, poor Mrs. Holmes! What will she do? We must go to her at once!'

"Both girls were so much upset that I thought it best to leave.

"The singular old man had made so haunting an impression upon me that I was deeply moved to hear of his sudden death. How strange that, except for his wife, I should have been the very last person to speak with him. No doubt pain had seized him in my very presence. That was why he had left so abruptly and without a word. Had death already brushed against his consciousness? That lovely, inexplicable smile? Was that the beginning of the peace that passes all understanding?

"Next day I told Miss Wilson and her sister all the details of the fabulous sale of the frog, and presented my check. Here I met with unexpected opposition. The sisters showed great unwillingness to accept the money. It was, they said, all mine. Besides they had no need of it.

"'You see,' explained Miss Wilson, 'my father had a flair for this business amounting to a sort of genius. He made quite a large fortune. When he became too old to carry on the shop, we kept it open, partly out of sentiment, partly for the sake of occupation. But we don't need to make any profit.'

"At last I prevailed upon them to accept the money, if only to spend it on the various charities in which they were interested. It was a relief to my mind when the matter was settled.

"The extraordinary incident of the jade frog made a bond between us, and in the course of our amicable arguments we became very friendly. I fell into the way of dropping in on them quite often, and soon began quite to rely on their sympathetic companionship.

"I never forgot the impression made on me by the old man, and often questioned the sisters about their poor caretaker, but they had nothing of any interest to tell me. They merely described him as an 'old dear' who had been in their father's service for years and

years. No further light was thrown on his sale of the frog. Naturally, they did not like to question his widow.

"One evening while I was having tea in the inner room with the elder sister, I picked up a photograph album. Turning its pages, I came on a remarkably fine likeness of the old man. There, before my eyes, was that strange, striking countenance; but evidently this photograph had been taken many years before I saw him. The face was fuller and had not yet acquired the frail, infinitely wearied look I remembered. But what magnificent eyes! There certainly was something extraordinarily impressive about the man.

"What a splendid photograph of poor old Holmes!" I said.

"Photograph of Holmes? I'd no idea there was one. Let's see."

"As I handed her the open book, her young sister, Bessie, looked in through the open door.

"I'm off to the movies now," she called out. "Father's just rung up to say he'll be round in a few minutes to have a look at that Sheraton sideboard."

"All right, Bessie, I'll be here, and very glad to have Father's opinion," said Miss Wilson, taking the album from my hand.

"I can't see any photograph of old Holmes," she said.

"I pointed to the top of the page.

"That?" she exclaimed. "Why, that's my dear father!"

"Your *father*!" I gasped.

"Yes, I can't imagine any two people more unlike. It must have been very dark when you saw Holmes!"

"Yes, yes; it *was* very dark," I said quickly—just to gain time to think, for I felt bewildered. No degree of darkness could possibly explain any such mistake. I had no moment's doubt as to the identity of the man I had taken for the caretaker with the one whose photograph I held in my hand. But what an amazing, inexplicable thing!

"Her *father*? Why on earth should he have been in the shop unknown to his daughters? For what possible motive had he concealed his sale of the frog? And when he heard of its value, why had he left the girls under the impression that it was Holmes, the dead caretaker, who had sold it?

"Had he been ashamed to confess his own inadvertence? Or was it possible that the girls had never told him the astonishing sequel to the sale? Did they perhaps not want him to know of their sudden acquisition? Into what strange family intrigue had I stumbled? But, whoever it was who had been so secretive, it was none of my

business. I didn't want to give anyone away. No, I must hold my tongue.

"The younger sister had said the father was just coming. Would he recognize me as his customer? If so, it might be rather embarrassing.

" 'It's a splendid face,' I said shyly.

" *Isn't it?*" she said with pleased eagerness. 'So clever and strong, don't you think? I remember when that photograph was taken. It was just before he got religion.' The girl spoke as if she referred to some distressing illness.

" 'Did he suddenly become very religious?'

" 'Yes,' she said reluctantly. 'Poor Father! He made friends with a priest, and became so changed. He was never the same again.'

"From the break in the girl's voice, I guessed she thought her father's reason had been affected. Perhaps this explained the whole affair? On the two occasions when I had seen him, was he wandering in mind as well as body?

" 'Did his religion make him unhappy?' I ventured to ask, for I was most anxious for more light on the strange being before I met him again.

" 'Yes, dreadfully.' The girl's eyes were full of tears. 'You see . . . it was . . .' She hesitated, but after a glance at me went on, 'There's really no reason why I shouldn't tell you. I've come to look on you as a real friend. My poor father began to think he had done something very wrong. He couldn't quiet his conscience. You remember my telling you of his extraordinary flair? Well, his fortune had really been founded on three marvelous strokes of business. You see, he had exactly the same sort of luck you had here the other day—that's why I decided to tell you. It seems such an odd coincidence.'

"She paused.

" 'Please go on,' I urged.

" 'Well, on three separate occasions he bought for a few shillings objects that were of immense value. Only unlike you—he *did* know what he was about. The profit made on their sale was no surprise to him. Unlike you, he did not then see any obligation to make it up to the ignorant people who had thrown away fortunes. After all, most dealers wouldn't, would they?' she asked defensively. 'Well, Father grew richer and richer. . . . Years later, he met this priest, and then he seemed to go sort of—er—morbidity. He began to think that our wealth had been founded on what was really no better

than theft. He reproached himself bitterly for having taken advantage of those three men's ignorance. Unhappily in each case he succeeded in discovering what had ultimately happened to those he called his "victims." Most unfortunately, all three customers had died destitute. This discovery made him incurably miserable. Two of these men had died without leaving any children, so, as no relations could be found, my father was unable to make amends.

"The son of the third he traced to America: but there he, too, had died leaving no family. So poor Father could find no means of making reparation. That was what he longed for—to make reparation. His failure preyed and preyed on him, until his poor dear mind became quite unhinged. As religion gained stronger and stronger hold on him, he took a queer sort of notion into his head—a regular obsession. "The next best thing to doing a good deed yourself," he would say, *"is to provide someone else with the opportunity—to give him his cue. In our sins Christ is crucified afresh. Because I sinned against Him thrice, I must somehow be the cause of three correspondingly good actions that will counterbalance my own sins. In no other way can I atone for my crimes against Christ, for crimes they were."*

"In vain we argued with him, assuring him he had done only as nearly all other men would have done. It was no use. "Other men must judge for themselves. I have done what I know to be wrong," he would moan. He grew more and more fixed in his idea of—er—expiation. It became positive religious mania!

"Determined to find three human beings who, by their good actions, would, as it were, *cancel* out the pain caused to Divinity by what he called his "three crimes," he busied himself in finding insignificant-looking works of art which he would offer for a few shillings.

"Poor old Father! Never shall I forget his joy when one day a man brought back a vase he had bought for five shillings, and then discovered to be worth six hundred pounds: "I think you must have made a mistake," the man said. Just as you did, bless you!

"Five years later a similar thing occurred, and he was, oh, so radiant. Two of humanity's crimes cancelled out—two-thirds of his expiation achieved!

"Then followed years and years of weary disappointment. "I shall never rest. I can't. No, never, never, until I find the third," he used to say.

"Here the girl began to weep. Hiding her face behind her hands,



she murmured, 'Oh, if only *you* had come sooner!'

"I heard the jingle-jangle of the bell.

" 'How he must have suffered!' I said. 'I'm so glad I had the luck to be the third. Is he satisfied now?'

"Her hands dropped from her face; she stared at me.

"I heard footsteps approach.

" 'I'm so glad I'm going to meet him again,' I said.

" 'Meet him?' she echoed in amazement as the footsteps neared.

" 'Yes, I may stay and see your father, mayn't I? I heard your sister say he would soon be here.'

" 'Oh, now I understand!' she exclaimed. 'You mean *Bessie's* father! But Bessie and I are only stepsisters. *My* poor father died years and years ago.'

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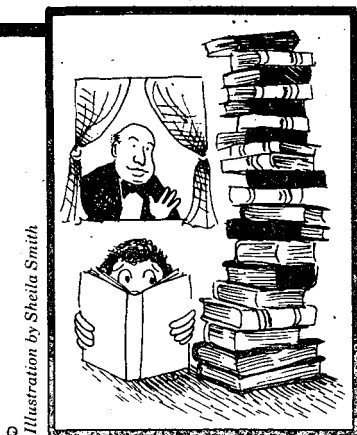
### **SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

---

Mr. Blue is a Blue; Mr. White is a Pink; and Mr. Pink is a White.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**A** HMM is turning thirty with this issue. That's a milestone, so I thought I'd acknowledge the anniversary with a list of thirty of my favorite books. Sounds easy, doesn't it? It wasn't. (I show the same weakness toward popcorn; I cannot stop after one small bowlful.)

What follows is a list of novels that I've roughly subdivided into broad categories in an effort to provide a "user's guide." This list is in no way complete, or even exclusive. I don't claim these are the *best*. I merely offer them as a list of many of my own favorites.

## Police Procedurals:

- The Far Away Man* by William Marshall (Hong Kong)
- The Streetbird* by Janwillem van de Wetering (Amsterdam)
- Roseanna* by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö (Sweden)

## Beloved British Books:

- The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle
- The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey
- The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie
- The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy Sayers
- The Man with a Load of Mischief* by Martha Grimes (This writer is American, but the tradition is definitely British, as is her detective.)

*The Glass-Sided Ants' Nest* by Peter Dickinson  
*Tiger in the Smoke* by Margery Allingham

**Espionage and Contemporary Thrillers:**

*Convergence* by Jack Fuller  
*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* by John le Carré  
*Murder at the Red October* by Anthony Olcott  
*Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris

**Gothic/Horror/Period Pieces:**

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker  
*The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins  
*Interview with a Vampire* by Anne Rice  
*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier  
*Time and Again* by Jack Finney  
*The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco

**Amateurs/Loners/Private Investigators:**

*The Cooking School Murders* by Virginia Rich  
*Dark Nantucket Moon* by Jane Langton  
*Death and the Good Life* by Richard Hugo  
*Carioca Fletch* by Gregory McDonald  
*Death of a Doll* by Hilda Lawrence

**Humorous (A Sub-head of the Above Category):**

*The Thin Woman* by Dorothy Cannell  
*The Moving Toyshop* by Edmund Crispin  
*Dolly and the Bird of Paradise* by Dorothy Dunnett  
*Sleeping Dog* by Dick Lochte  
*C. B. Greenfield: The Tanglewood Murders* by Lucille Kallen

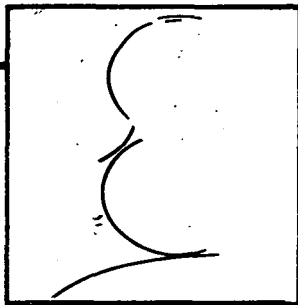
Believe me, it was a hateful task having to choose so few among many, and the categories are deplorably scanty. But I had a jolly time making my selections; furthermore, a list of outstanding mysteries—especially if it's noted that these are but some of the scores of worthy titles—is as good a way as any to celebrate AHMM's birthday. I hope you can join me in the festivities, and sample some of the books on the list that you haven't already discovered for yourself.



William Petersen as the FBI forensics specialist Will Graham in *Manhunter*.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



**T**he title makes it sound like a routine, Charles Bronson-style pursuit movie, but **Manhunter**, made from Thomas Harris's best-selling *Red Dragon* (reviewed by Mary Cannon several years ago in AHMM), is an intricate, intelligent, police procedural. A serial killer who murders entire families is on the loose. He strikes when the moon is full, so as the action gets under way there is just under a month to find him. The two families he has murdered lived in Atlanta and Birmingham, and they seem to have had nothing in common. How on earth can anyone figure out who the killer is, and where he will strike again?

Retired FBI forensics specialist Will Graham once solved a similar case. By imaginatively projecting himself into a

serial killer's fantasies, he had been able to spot the man among those being questioned about the killings. Afterward, though, Graham suffered a breakdown brought on by the ordeal of having to live with these same fantasies. When he reluctantly agrees to help the police find the new killer, he knows the psychological danger. But what he doesn't anticipate is that, along with his wife and young son, he will eventually be targeted by the killer.

The plot resembles Clint Eastwood's *Tightrope*, which we reviewed back in Mid-December 1984, and actor William Petersen plays Will Graham in the controlled, minimalist Eastwood style. But both the police work and the psycholog-

ical complications are more intricate in *Manhunter*, in keeping with Graham's forensics specialty. For example the killer wore gloves so as not to leave fingerprints, but Graham intuitively felt that he would have felt compelled to touch his victims after they were dead. He orders a second fingerprint dusting, this time to include the eyeballs, where a corneal fingerprint does show up.

Graham keeps going over the two murder scenes, uncovering clues and thinking his way into the killer's mind. He also works with home movies of both families, which the audience watches along with him until the operative clue emerges. Before this, there is some cryptography and chemical enhancement of letters down at the police lab, along with saliva testing and other forensic specialties. Yet in the context of the killer's brutality and the rising tension as another full moon approaches, these technical matters arouse more than intellectual curiosity. The opposite poles of brutality and intellection define the nature and appeal of the murder mystery, but the two aren't always poised in such ideal balance as here.

The premise of debilitating psychological identification with

a killer's fantasies of course has no basis in reality. And Graham's conclusion that the killer must have been an abused child is hardly convincing psychology. But the theme of the killer's being someone who compulsively *views* his victims is a compelling one. With Graham, we survey the murder scenes from a madman's point of view. They are photographed from odd angles and with a wide range of light intensities that render them the audience's visual equivalent of Graham's search. The solution itself has to do with sight, and like the best solutions it turns out to have been there all along—virtually in plain sight, as the saying goes.

There's a lot more plot in *Manhunter*—too much more, in fact. The killer is made known to the audience. He is seen murdering a journalist and having an affair with a blind girl. The previous serial killer, still alive in an institution, also becomes part of the action. While not strictly necessary, though, the scenes showing the two serial killers are filmed and played with sharp intensity. Like Will Graham's forensics, and like the rest of *Manhunter* for that matter, they are done solidly and professionally.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The August Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Mark Truman of Midway City, California. Honorable mentions go to Nancy Hartman of Canyon Lake, California; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Elliott W. Smith of Moraga, California; Verna J. Persinger of Rock Springs, Wyoming; Martha Ann Robertson of Rocky Face, Georgia; David F. Miner of Union, Missouri; Kimber Watts of Greenville, South Carolina; Benjamin H. Foreman of Manchester, Connecticut; William B. Greene of Medford, Oregon; L. Jane Greenberg of Huntington Station, New York; and Mrs. H. A. Renfroe of Harleton, Texas.

## HAIL FIRE by Mark Truman

"Chief Stone, did Mary Riggins ever tell you she was in trouble with someone?" asked one of Police Chief Charley Stone's subordinates at the scene of the crime.

"No, she didn't, but if she had wanted to she could have told me yesterday. We only live four houses apart. After she was shot I pulled my Falcon over, ran over to her, and asked, 'Who were you trying to hail, Mary, me or the taxi?' But she was gone before she could reply," Stone answered.

An investigator broke away from the taxi driver he was questioning and approached Chief Stone and his man in blue. He introduced himself as Jeff Slater and told Charley that the killer was probably deranged because he left the weapon and plenty of clues on the top of the building he fired from. He added, "We'll get him pretty soon, but it's bugging me that we don't know if she was trying to get a taxi or hail Stone."

The policeman of the trio, his teeth clenched, watched the departing ambulance. The investigator and Chief Stone noticed his disturbed expression, which threatened to explode into rage.

"C'mon, Brooks," Charley said to break the officer's fuming, "I'll buy you lunch."

As the pair turned to leave, Slater grabbed Brooks's elbow. "We'll get him no matter what the circumstances because it has no bearing on the case whether she was trying to hail a taxi or hail to the chief."



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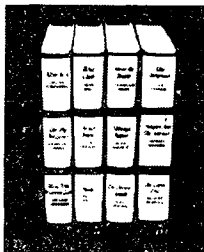
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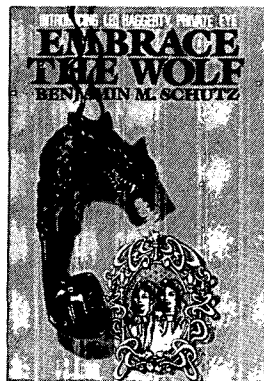
■ Get a letter from Leo Haggerty, write dept. LH1

\*OCALA STAR-BANNER (FLA)

**A LEO HAGGERTY THRILLER  
ALL THE OLD  
BARGAINS  
BENJAMIN M. SCHUTZ**



jacket art: Jill Baumann



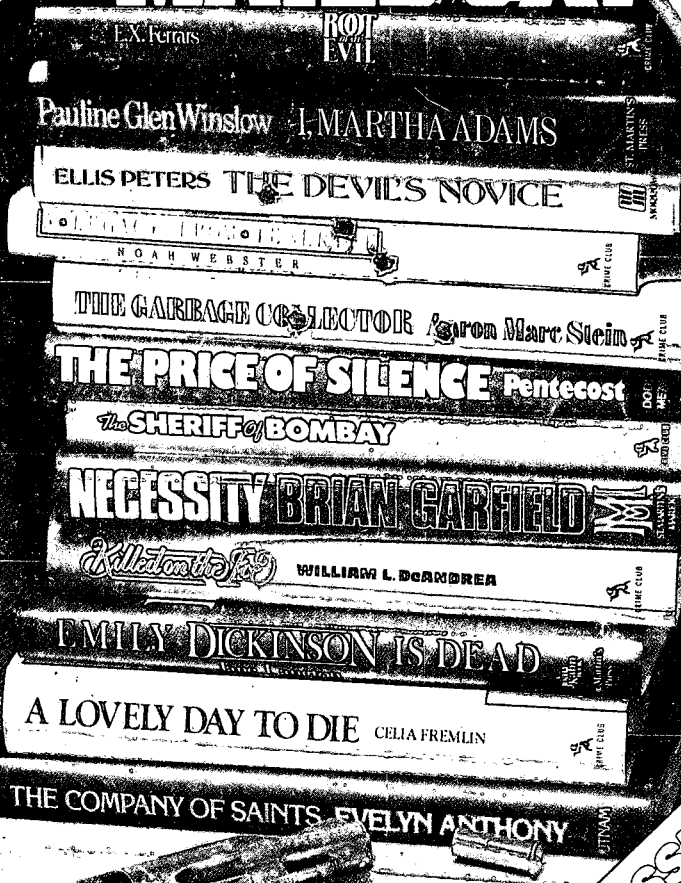
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